# OLIVER HASTINGS V.C.

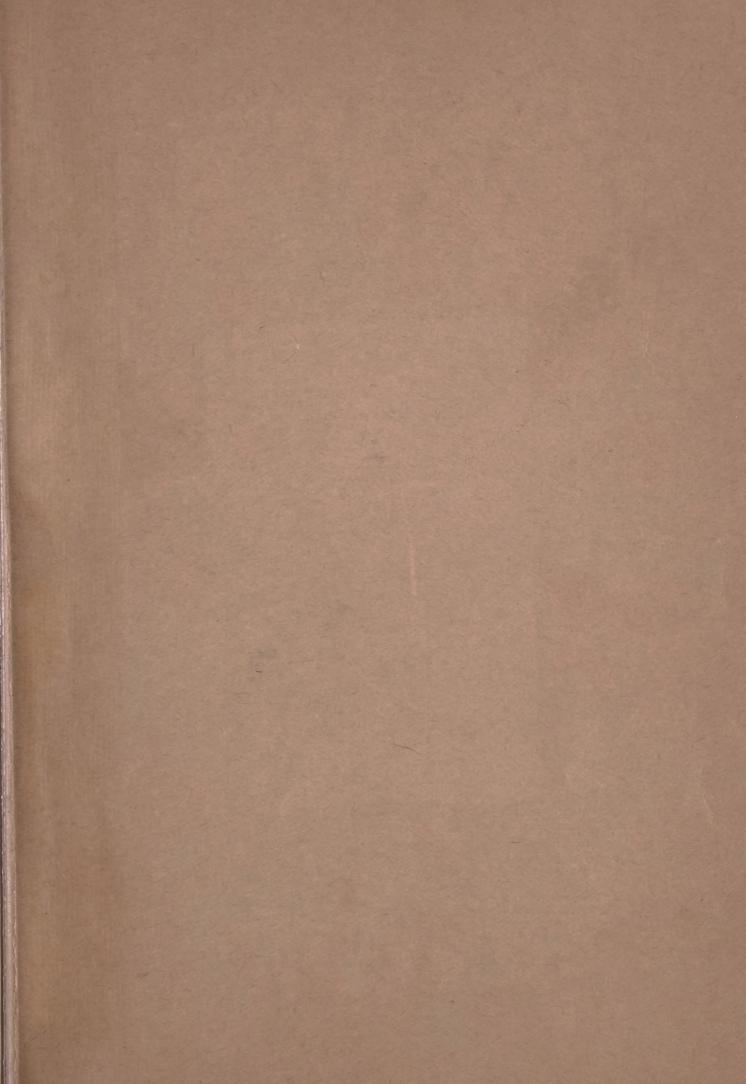
Escott Lynn





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'My dear chap, I'll confess to you that I'm in a veritable funk, and, if I could, I'd run away.'

O.H.—Front.

PAGE 143.

## Oliver Hastings, V.C.

A REALISTIC STORY OF THE GREAT WAR

By

ESCOTT LYNN

Author of 'In Khaki for the King,' A Hero of the Mutiny,' Blair of Balaclava,' &c.

WITH EIGHT ILLUSTRATIONS

by

Harold Earnshaw

#### E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY

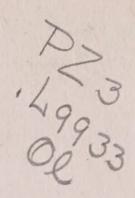
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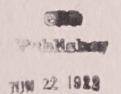


TO

MAJOR P. C. LAWRENCE,

1ST BATTALION, THE DUKE OF EDINBURGH'S

WILTSHIRE REGIMENT.



9.6.9m. June 29/2

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### OLIVER HASTINGS, V.C.

#### CHAPTER I.

#### BACK IN HARNESS.

KHAKI, khaki everywhere! Officers and men, Regulars and Territorials! Look where you would, they were in tens, in dozens, and in scores!

One o'clock at Victoria Station! The 'trench train' was at the platform ready to start-in the right-hand bay the officers' portion, in the left the men's. Englishmen, Scotsmen, Welshmen, Irishmen; Canadians, New Zealanders, Australians, and South Africans; men from the burning plains of India and from the frozen wastes of Hudson Bay-all the Lion's cubs were there. Every man, too, had faced death many times in the trenches or on the battlefields of France or Flanders. Not one of the rank and file but had served for not less than nine months against the most persistent and most ruthless foe Great Britain had ever faced. After a brief spell at home, they were going back to it all again, to stand for hours and days knee-deep in water or mud, every nerve tense with excitement, while shrapnel or highexplosive shells fell around them; to charge in the teeth of infernos of rifle and machine-gun fire, or to carry out the less glorious, though equally dangerous,

task of bringing up supplies or bearing away the wounded.

But nothing of all this recked the jostling crowd of soldiers. Laughing and joking, passing bantering remarks to one another, braced, buckled, and armed just as they had left the firing-line, these humble heroes kissed a fond good-bye to wife, child, or mother, gave a farewell grip of the hand to father, brother, or wounded comrade, and then packed themselves into the waiting train as unconcernedly as though but going to a royal review. The officers, spick and span, newly groomed and fitted out, stepped into the dining-cars, and, with a farewell greeting as the train glided out, were gone. A few minutes later a guard blew his whistle, carriage doors were slammed, and the men's train followed, those left behind on the platform giving a hearty cheer, replied to still more lustily by the men returning to 'carry on in the trenches!' A minute later only those who had come to see them off remained upon the platform.

Amongst those whom curiosity alone had brought to the spot were two young lieutenants, Oliver Hastings and Vivian Drummond. Each wore on his breast the ribbons of several decorations; and this fact, coupled with the extremely youthful appearance of Oliver Hastings, the younger of the two, had caused many of those on the platform to gaze with some curiosity at the young men. In spite of their youth, both had proved their mettle on the field of glory. They had taken part in the heroic retreat from Mons, had borne a glorious share in the victory of the Marne, fought at the Aisne, and after many weary months of winter in the trenches had been in the battle of Neuve Chapelle, where both had had

the misfortune to be wounded and to be invalided home.\*

'Wonderful chaps, the Tommies, Vivian!' said Oliver Hastings, as they turned to leave the platform.

'Wonderful is not the word; they're magnificent,' replied Vivian Drummond. 'With such men, and given enough of them, we must win.'

'Provided the workers at home only back them up

with munitions.'

'No croaking, youngster! Leave that to the stayat-homes. As soldiers, all that concerns us is the fighting part of the programme.'

'Which is quite enough to go on with. But we must hurry,' said Oliver, looking at his wrist watch,

'or we shall keep the mater waiting.'

'By Jove! that won't do.' And the two, making a

dive across the road, jumped into a taxi.

It was the month of July 1915, and Oliver and Vivian had spent their convalescence, a most enjoyable time, with the former's people. But the course of events had not run so smoothly with the Allies as had been hoped. Officers, especially experienced ones, were badly wanted, and the two friends had

applied to be returned to duty.

Vivian Drummond belonged to the Coldstream Guards, while Oliver Hastings, a Yeomanry lieutenant only at the beginning of the war, had been attached to the cavalry. But Oliver's father, who had been on the staff in the early days of the war, had obtained command of the 10th Battalion of the Wessex Fusiliers, and Oliver naturally wished to serve under his father. There was nothing strange in that; but

<sup>\*</sup> Note A-'In Khaki for the King.'

how it came about that Vivian, a Guardsman, agreed to transfer to a Territorial battalion requires some explanation.

It was true that experienced officers were most urgently needed in these newly raised battalions, and, as Vivian said, he wanted to be with his friend Oliver; but these reasons by themselves would probably have been insufficient to persuade a Guardsman to transfer to a Territorial battalion. A further reason could perhaps be found in Vivian's anxiety not to keep Mrs Hastings or her daughter waiting for them at Claridge's, where they had arranged to lunch, and in the manner in which, during lunch, he devoted himself entirely to Miss Hastings. With great satisfaction he told her that it was all settled at the War Office, and that he and Oliver were joining next morning, asking if there was any message he could take to the pater. From which it may be inferred that Marjory Hastings had a very great deal to do with Vivian's electing to serve in the 10th Battalion of the Wessex Fusiliers rather than in the Coldstream Guards.

There was much to be done that day in packing and writing and bidding farewells, and night came all too soon for Vivian. Both he and Oliver were up betimes in the morning; and as there would be no one to escort Mrs Hastings and Marjory back from Waterloo, whence Oliver and Vivian were starting, the boys, by their own request, went off alone, and eleven o'clock found them en route to headquarters.

#### CHAPTER II.

#### THE NEW CHUMS.

HAT'S a funny-looking specimen of the British Army, Vivian, said Oliver, as a rather diminutive figure in khaki passed them. He was middle-aged, short, and rather stout, with very blue eyes looking through rimless pince-nez, and he wore a cap that seemed a little too large for him, and a sword that almost touched the ground.

'Yes, this new army, as they call it, is composed of men of all sorts,' replied Vivian; 'but I dare say they 'll

all do their duty when the time comes.'

On the platform were a good many officers, and one red-faced young subaltern was hurrying up and down the train as though looking for some one. He suddenly caught sight of Vivian and Oliver, and, noticing the grenade on their caps, stopped, gave a sort of shoddy salute, something after the fashion of a porter acknowledging a tip, and said, 'Hallo, gentlemen, do you belong to the Wessex Fusiliers?'

'We have that honour,' admitted Vivian a little stiffly, for he could not quite forget that he was an

ex-Guardsman.

'By George, then we're brother-officers!' continued the red-faced youth. 'Are you going down to join?' 'We are.'

'That's good; there'll be quite a lot of us. My name's Skinner—Norman Skinner.'

'Good-day to you, Mr Skinner,' said Vivian, and

would have moved away; but Oliver, a little less exclusive by nature, perhaps, than Vivian, and scenting some fun, shook hands with Lieutenant Skinner, and said, 'Glad to meet you. My name's Hastings, and this is my friend Lieutenant Drummond.'

'Hastings, eh!' said Skinner; 'same name as the chief! Funny that! They tell me he's "hot stuff."'

Vivian raised his eyebrows at hearing the Colonel thus spoken of; but Oliver said, 'Oh no, the Colonel's all right; he's as mild as a lamb.'

'Is he really?' asked Skinner. 'I hope he is. I've been in a funk, for I'm always making mistakes on parade. I only just managed to scrape through at Crowborough. Good thing I did, though, or the pater would have been jolly wild. You know my dad's Skinner the provision merchant. You've heard of Skinner's sausages, I dare say. The pater's made a pile out of them. When I left school I was shoved into his office and made a sort of glorified quill-driver. But the war gave me my chance; I got the dad to foot the bill, and here I am, a full-blown officer.'

Oliver could hardly forbear smiling at the effusive young fellow, and, for want of something better to say, remarked that he hoped to be able to sample some of the celebrated sausages at the mess.

'I hope not!' fervently ejaculated Skinner. 'I hate the very name of 'em. But there's two more of "ours" going down. Jolly chaps. Let me introduce you;' and he dashed away.

'What on earth did you want to strike up an acquaintance with that fellow for?' asked Vivian.

'Well, we shall have to see a good deal of him, as

he belongs to our corps,' answered Oliver; 'and, besides, he looks as though he would provide some amusement. But here he comes.'

Lieutenant Norman Skinner came puffing back, dragging with him the curious little man with the blue eyes, and a taller young fellow, rather knock-kneed, with a slight cast in one eye and a preternaturally grave manner.

'Let me introduce my two chums,' said Skinner.
'This is Jimmy Crawford, and this Archibald Harris.'

Lieutenant Crawford, the little man, drew himself up stiffly, saluted correctly in two motions, and, in a deep voice, which made Oliver and Vivian wonder where on earth it came from out of so small a man, said, as though giving a word of command, 'De-lighted, I'm sure.' Lieutenant Harris shook hands in a shy sort of way, and the five chatted together for a minute or so.

It was soon clear that Crawford's small body contained a soul bursting with military ardour; his language was freely interspersed with professional terms, and he seemed to have imbibed a vast amount of knowledge from the drill-book. Harris was a dreamy, theoretical sort of young man; and altogether Vivian thought the three 'new chums' were a very odd trio.

'Hadn't we better be seeing about getting seats?'

suggested Harris.

'By Jove! so we had,' said Crawford. 'Fours left—I mean, come on,' he added with a blush, and marching straight ahead, as though leading a platoon, he made for the train.

'Crawford is great!' whispered Skinner with a prodigious wink. 'He'd like to eat to the tap of

the drum, and he'd drill us all like a colour-sergeant if he had his way.'

The five got a carriage to themselves, and proceeded to make themselves comfortable.

'I say, boys, one of our new friends here is a namesake of the Colonel,' said Skinner. 'Funny, isn't it? And he told me the chief is as mild as a lamb. Jolly, isn't it?'

'Mild as a lamb!' said Crawford, turning as though shot. 'I've heard he's very strict. I hope he is. I want to serve under a real soldier. I'd sooner have a martinet than a slacker for a chief.'

'You'll get enough of it, Jimmy, when you're out in the trenches,' said Skinner. 'You'll get all the soldiering you want, I'll bet.'

'Gluttonous fellow, Crawford,' sighed Harris; 'puts me in mind of Judge Pitman in one of Max Adeler's yarns, who could never have enough of anything. When the weather was broiling he wanted it hotter; if it poured with rain he'd say it was splendid for the umbrella-makers; if it froze hard he'd sit in his garden and pray for it to last, and give the skate-makers a chance. If he'd been a soldier he'd'—

'Oh, shut up, Harris!' interrupted Skinner. 'You make me dizzy with your everlasting quotations.'

'Well, give us a quotation yourself for a change.'

'I couldn't quote a line to save my life. Books always made my head ache, and my father's account-books used to make me absolutely ill. Thank goodness, I've escaped from them!'

'There's still the drill-book,' Crawford reminded

him.

'And now I've done with that, I hope,' said

Skinner, as the train cleared the station. 'Let us smoke.'

While he had been speaking Oliver and Vivian had removed their raincoats, for it had been drizzling all the morning, and when they sat down the medalribbons which each wore could be seen for the first time. Skinner was in the act of handing his cigarette-case round, when he caught sight of the coloured stripes. He stared for a moment, then blurted out, 'Surely they can't be war decorations. Yet I don't know; if not, they must be orders. I say, I've made a mess of things; I had no idea you were "anybody." I thought you were just raw subs. like—like I am. I beg pardon, upon my honour.'

'What on earth for?' asked Oliver genially.

'But those—those ribbons! Why, you must be warriors, and you're neither of you as old as I am, I'm sure.'

Crawford's attention had been called to the matter, and he fixed his eyes on the ribbons. 'White and purple,' he muttered in deep tones. 'Why, Great Marlborough's shade! that's the ribbon of the new Military Cross.'

'Right, Jimmy,' said Harris reflectively.

Crawford's eyes were fixed on the other ribbons, and a great furrow deepened on his forehead as he stared, for he was unable to recognise them, and the study of war decorations was a favourite hobby of his.

'Strange!' he muttered. 'And both wear the same decorations, too.' Then, seeing Vivian's glance fixed upon him, he coloured and said humbly, 'Your pardon. I had no intention of being rude; but I—we—that is, we had no idea we were in the

company of distinguished officers. Your age took us off our guard.'

'Don't mention it; we're no distinguished officers,

just simple soldiers like you all.'

'But those orders,' and Skinner pointed to the ribbons.

"Boy Scouts' medals,' murmured Oliver, hiding a smile behind his hand.

Skinner might have swallowed the statement; but Crawford was too deeply read in military lore to be deceived, and he said in his solemn tones, 'Gentlemen, the Wessex Fusiliers are fortunate in possessing such distinguished officers in its junior ranks; and we-I think I can speak for you two'-and he glanced at Skinner and Harris-'and we are proud to serve with you. Your confidence we should have valued, and the recital of your experiences, for they must have been most interesting, might have beguiled the tedium of the journey; but if you prefer, with that modesty which always distinguishes the real hero, to say nothing, we shall respect your reserve. Anyhow, I should esteem it a favour to shake hands again with each of you;' and he offered his hand, which both Oliver and Vivian grasped warmly, for there was, despite what Vivian afterwards described as his 'military pomposity,' a simple manliness about Crawford that appealed to one.

'Jimmy always says the right thing,' said Skinner admiringly.

'Right turn — dismiss,' added Harris, copying Crawford's manner.

'Look here,' said Vivian, to whom anything like hero-worship was unbearable, 'Hastings and I had the luck to be in Germany on the outbreak of the war, and, escaping to Mons, we were in the scrapping till we both got temporarily knocked out at Neuve Chapelle. We've been lucky, and, coming under notice, bagged the Military Cross, the Legion of Honour, and the Belgian medal, while better men have got nothing.'

The three subs. looked at the two heroes with that admiration born in unfledged subs. for those who have distinguished themselves in the field; and Crawford said, a little diffidently, 'I suppose you wouldn't—er—think it impertinent if I were to ask you a question or two; for, closely as I have tried to study the campaign, there's little real information to be got, and I've never yet had the good fortune to meet any one from the front.'

'Fire away!' said Oliver. 'We only saw what went on just around us; but Drummond or I will tell you with pleasure all we know about the war.'

And to Crawford the rest of the journey was a dream, so engrossed was he in listening to the experiences of Oliver and Vivian. From that moment the two were heroes on whom Crawford meant to model his future conduct. He was aroused by hearing a porter shout out the name of their destination, and he jumped up in alarm. 'Fall in!' he cried. 'I mean, get out, for here we are;' and they alighted on to the platform, where porters seized their luggage and conveyed it to the brake which had been sent down to take them to headquarters.

#### CHAPTER III.

#### AN EXCITING FIVE MINUTES.

IT was a very pleasant drive, through a charming country, to the camp of the Wessex Fusiliers, who were under canvas. Arrived there, the young officers reported themselves to the Adjutant, and then learnt that the Colonel was absent on duty which had taken him to Folkestone.

Oliver and Vivian took possession of their quarters, and soon had things ship-shape. They joined the rest of the officers at lunch, and found them a very nice lot of fellows. The trio—Harris, Skinner, and Crawford—caused a few smiles among the senior officers, many of whom had seen home service with the Regulars or the Territorials; but, probably on account of their little eccentricities, they were more welcome than orthodox subalterns would have been.

Lunch over, there was nothing for the newly joined officers to do until the next day, and Oliver proposed to Vivian to take a walk and look round the country, as they would probably not get very much time for doing so once they had taken up their duties. Crawford, ever anxious to imbibe information about the war, asked to be allowed to make one of the party, and Skinner, insatiable for society, as a matter of course accompanied Crawford. The studious Harris preferred remaining in camp 'to unpack and make things comfortable.'

It turned out to be a very fine afternoon, the rain having apparently been left behind in London, and the subs. strolled along for a mile or two, admiring the pretty and well-wooded country, until, having reached the railway, which here runs through a deep cutting, they sprawled lazily amongst the gorse on the top of the bank to take a rest for half-an-hour before they retraced their steps.

The bank on which the officers were lying, being higher than the one on the opposite side, commanded a good view along the road which ran beside the railway. About a hundred yards to the left the ground fell away, and the line was on a level with the country. At the end of the cutting was a signal-box, and just beyond that a fair-sized siding, in which were some hundreds of trucks of coal and other heavy merchandise.

Looking to their right, the subs. could see for a very long distance, as the line was straight and level.

The day being hot, Skinner dropped off to sleep; Oliver and Crawford were deep in the discussion of the war; while Vivian, always practical, was looking round the country with an eye to its military possibilities.

He had been lying on his chest with his chin resting on his hands, when he suddenly cried out in low tones, 'Drop on the ground, you fellows, and make yourselves small for a few minutes!'

Oliver, with the ready obedience of the old campaigner, who knows that often a man's life depends upon the instant and unquestioning obedience of an order, dropped flat on his face, and dragged the unexpecting Crawford with him.

'I say,' exclaimed the astonished sub., 'you'll break my glasses.'

But Oliver pressed his nose firmly among the

short grass, remarking, 'Don't speak or move; de-

pend upon it, Vivian knows what he is doing.'

Had Crawford been bidden stand on his head or hold his breath by either Oliver or Vivian he would have endeavoured to obey, so filled with admiration for them was he; hence he lay perfectly still until Vivian said, 'Crawl up here, but keep well behind the gorse-bush.'

They did as they were bidden, and, glancing down, saw an old white-haired man with dark spectacles looking up and down the line. Presently he removed his spectacles, and, producing a pair of small field-

glasses, looked up the line attentively.

'What's the matter, Vivian?' whispered Oliver.

'It may be nothing,' replied Vivian in the same tone, 'or it may be something. There is always an element of suspicion attaching to any one who in war-time hangs about railway lines along which troops or munitions may pass.'

'By Jove, of course!' agreed Oliver, while Crawford regularly quivered with satisfaction to think he was sharing an adventure with two such distinguished

companions.

The three watched the old man narrowly for some minutes, and, to their disappointment, he seemed quite harmless; he did not attempt to place a bomb or a sleeper on the metals, nor did he show any inclination to interfere in any way with the next train that came along.

'Seems a harmless old body,' muttered Oliver

presently.

'That's just it; he looks so old and so harmless that the fact of his arriving on a motor-bike rather makes me suspicious.' 'That old man on a motor-bike?' said Oliver.

'Exactly; you can just see it up on the road. He hid it carefully behind those bushes, then slithered down the incline in a way a very old man would have found a bit difficult. Hallo, he's got his binoculars out again!'

'What on earth can he be staring at?'

'Why not the signals, Oliver?'

'By Jove! I never thought of that; and see! the old boy has shut up his glasses, and—— Why, what on earth is he doing?'

This exclamation was called forth by the old man taking a thing that looked like a metal box from his hip-pocket. Next he tied his handkerchief over his nose and mouth, took a bottle of some liquid from his breast-pocket, and shook the contents into the metal box, which he replaced in his pocket. Removing the handkerchief, he then set off quickly down the line in the direction of the signal-box. Glancing up the line, Vivian, who had very strong long-distance sight, saw that the signals had been dropped for 'down-line clear.'

'There's mischief in this,' he cried. 'Crawl back

out of sight! Now, up and away!'

Their side of the cutting being higher than the other, any one a little distance from the edge was quite invisible to those on the other side; and no sooner were they out of sight than, led by Vivian, the three of them, in their haste forgetting all about Skinner, raced along towards the signal-box. They had passed it some distance, when Vivian cautiously peeped over just in time to see the old man ascending the steps of the signal-box.

'Follow!' he cried, and dashed down the steep

bank, across the metals, and made for the signal-box.

As they ran along they heard the *snap* that points make when they are pulled over; and Oliver, looking at the metals, saw that the points leading into the siding had been opened, and that any train coming along the down line would dash into a heavy trainload of coal, and be smashed to bits.

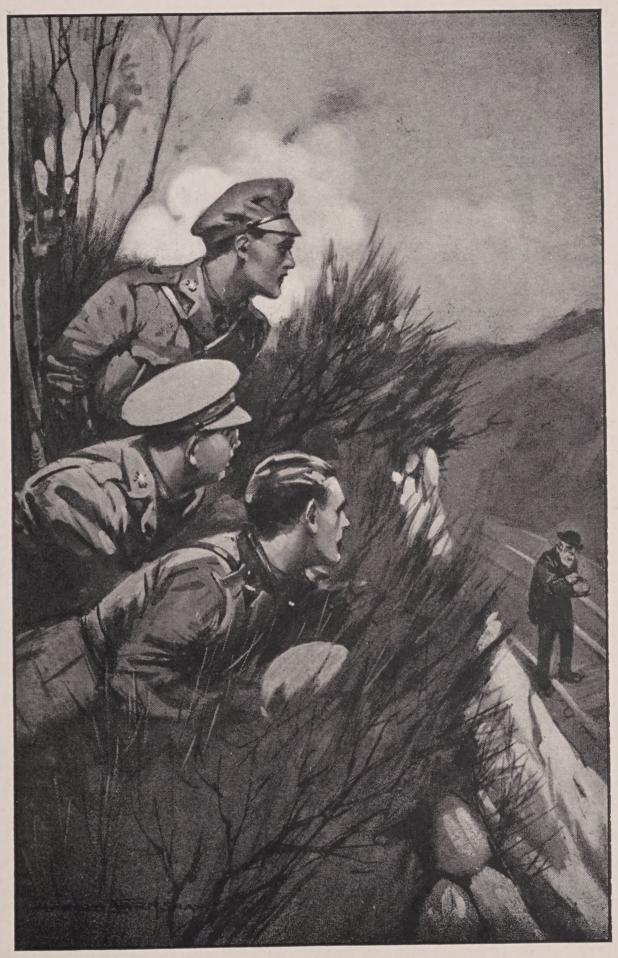
The diabolical nature of the design staggered him for a moment; then he jerked out his suspicions to his companions.

'Faster,' was Vivian's only comment, and they raced along, past the signal-box, and up the steps. The door was open, and a curious sight met their gaze. The signalman lay in a heap on the floor with a white cloth pressed over his face; a pungent smell filled the box, while the old man was feverishly tapping at the telegraph instrument. So engrossed was he that the first intimation he received of having been watched was the three subs. bursting into the box.

Crawford, his blue eyes flashing with excitement, cried in his deep voice, 'Scoundrel, by the laws of warfare you are my prisoner; deliver your sword!'

The old man turned round, quick as light whipped out an automatic pistol, and fired. Oliver, who was close to Crawford, dashed up the man's arm, and Vivian, with a spring like a tiger, hurled himself upon the old man, and engaged him in a fierce struggle. He found his enemy possessed of great strength, and was wondering at it, when in the struggle his white hair and beard came off, and a pale, sinister, clean-shaven face was revealed.

Oliver, who saw this was no time for standing on



'Why, what on earth is he doing?'



ceremony, at the moment that Vivian had grappled with his enemy, made a dash for the hand that held the pistol, and, seizing it, wrenched the weapon from his grasp. At that instant the false hair and beard came off; both Oliver and Vivian saw the man's face, and both recognised him.

'Löffel!' cried Vivian, and at the same time he struck the rascal so heavy a blow on the temple that he fell back stunned. Without a moment's hesitation Vivian dragged him to the door, and toppled him down the steps on to the ground. Picking up the pistol, he pushed it into Crawford's hand and said, 'Go down and guard him. If he comes to, and attempts to escape, shoot him.'

As Crawford ran down the steps Vivian heard a rumble. 'The train!' he cried. 'Rush down to the points, and shout out to me when I close them. For God's sake, hurry; hundreds of lives may depend on us!'

Oliver leapt down the steps, and Vivian tugged madly at the different levers. Puff—puff—puff, rattle—roar—the train was approaching at terrific speed. One after another Vivian tore at the levers. Some he could not move. Oh God! in another moment or two the train would be there; he could see Oliver, who shook his head and waved his arms appealingly. Rattle—scream—shriek—the train was only a hundred yards away when Vivian saw that some of the levers were pulled over. It must be one of these, of course; he gripped one, released the catch, slammed it back, and saw Oliver signal that it was the right one. Thank God, he was in time! He snatched up a red flag he saw lying on the table, thrust his head and body through the window, and yelling with

all his might, waved the flag madly just as the engine arrived opposite the box. But the driver had already shut off steam and applied the brake, for he had seen that the advance-signal was against him. Vivian caught a glimpse of a grimy figure in shirt-sleeves looking up at him; then with a roar and a screech, as dozens of British Tommies who were standing at the windows waved their hands at the signal-box, the train dashed past.

A bell began ringing loudly and persistently in the signal-box; but Vivian took no notice. Indeed, it would have been no good, for he did not under-

stand the working of the system.

He dashed down the steps, passing at the side of the box Crawford, who with pale face was grimly standing guard over his prisoner, who lay as though dead. Oliver, as pale as Crawford, and with the perspiration standing in big drops on his forehead, was looking after the train.

'Phew, that was a close shave!' he muttered when he saw Vivian.

'It was, but I think the danger is over now. The signalman behind must be told what has happened; but, unfortunately, I don't understand how the thing works.'

'Well, the train is pulling up.'

'So I see; indeed, it has almost stopped. We must tell them how matters stand.'

They both ran rapidly after the train, which was then almost at a standstill, and in a few minutes came up with it.

'What is the matter?' asked the rear guard, who had alighted from his van.

'Nothing, I hope, now,' replied Vivian; 'but there

might have been. Perhaps I had better have a few words with the officer in command of the men in the train.'

'That's him, I think, waving his arm to us,' said the guard.

'Come with us, will you? We may want your

help.'

Reaching the carriage, out of the window of which an elderly officer was leaning, Vivian requested a few private words. The officer, who was the colonel of the regiment in the train, alighted with his adjutant, and in a minute Vivian had told him what had happened.

The guard of the train, who had been of the party, turned pale on hearing the news. 'We must pull past the next signal at once,' he said, 'and keep the line behind us blocked. There's another troop train only a few minutes behind us. I'll tell the driver what's happened, and get him to move on a little.'

While the train went puffing slowly forward, the Colonel, Vivian, Oliver, and the guard went to the box, where the guard, who had once been a signalman, at once got to work with the telegraph apparatus. In a minute he reported 'all right; but,' he added, 'the man at the other signal-box was beginning to wonder what had happened.'

'Tell him to send the second train forward,' said Colonel Livesay. 'I wish to consult with the officer in command,' he explained to Vivian and Oliver. 'This is a most serious matter. It's monstrous to think that here, right in the very heart of our country, the enemy should be able to attempt such a diabolical outrage. Let's go down and have a look at the scoundrel who attempted it.'

They descended the steps of the signal-box, and there another shock awaited them.

Crawford lay on the ground insensible, bleeding from a wound on the head, while the prisoner had completely disappeared. Crawford had in all probability been lying thus for some minutes, and in the excitement had been unnoticed by the various actors in the scene as they arrived at the signal-box.

'The rascal must have recovered and attacked Crawford when he was off his guard,' said Vivian; 'but we may be able to overtake him yet.'

Attention at that moment was drawn to another khaki-clad figure who, with a shout to those round the signal-box, came slithering down the incline and across the metals.

'Here, I say, you chaps,' he exclaimed, 'what on earth has happened, and why did you leave me all alone; and what the dickens is all the racket about, and—— Oh, I beg pardon, sir; I didn't notice you at first;' and, saluting Colonel Livesay, Skinner, whom Oliver and Vivian had for the moment entirely forgotten, stood looking round him in a puzzled fashion.

#### CHAPTER IV.

#### COLONEL LIVESAY TAKES EVIDENCE.

THE astonished look which Colonel Livesay turned upon the rather shamefaced Skinner showed Oliver that an explanation was necessary.

'Four of us left the camp together, sir,' he said; 'but while we were taking a rest Lieutenant Skinner dropped off to sleep, and when we ran across to the signal-box, in our hurry we forgot to wake him.'

'H'm,' sniffed the Colonel, 'when I was a subaltern we kept awake in the daytime at any rate; but now it appears that, like children, subalterns want their

afternoon nap.'

Skinner looked duly abashed, until, suddenly catching sight of Crawford, over whom Vivian was bending, dabbing his face with a wet handkerchief, he forgot all about the Colonel and cried out, 'Jimmy hurt! Who did it?—Jimmy, Jimmy!' and, dropping on his knees beside his friend, he took one of his hands and looked with the greatest consternation upon his pale features. 'It must have been that fellow I saw sneaking off on the motor-bike,' he cried, as the idea crossed his mind.

'Up on top of the cutting?' asked Oliver; and Skinner was about to reply, when Crawford drew a deep sigh, opened his eyes, and after muttering incoherently for a few moments, sat stark upright and cried out, 'Platoon will advance; fix bayonets; charge!'

Colonel Livesay stared at the little man in surprise. 'He, at all events, is not much hurt,' he said. 'Now, how about the signalman?'

The guard, who had remained all the time in the signal-box, reported that he had come to, and was asking what had happened; and Colonel Livesay set about getting all the information he could.

Skinner's tale was soon told. He awoke suddenly -what woke him he did not know-to find he was alone. He looked all round for his companions, but the only living being he could see was the man scrambling up the bank on the opposite side of the cutting. The fellow staggered a little now and then, as though he had been drinking, but he reached the top and wheeled out a motor-cycle, which had apparently been hidden behind a bush. Catching sight of Skinner watching him from the other side of the cutting, he had shaken his fist and yelled out something which Skinner did not catch. He had then mounted and ridden away; on which Skinner, thinking his behaviour suspicious, had run along for some distance to see where he went, but presently losing sight of the cycle, had given up the chase, and slowly retraced his steps. On again coming in sight of the signal-box, to his surprise he had seen his friends outside it, and had hailed them as shown.

The signalman, who had revived, next told his story. The old gentleman, he said, was a Belgian refugee who had been staying in the neighbourhood. He had been a stationmaster in Brussels before the war, and expressed himself as much interested in English railway work. He had several times come up into the signal-box, and had asked lots of questions about the English system, explaining the difference between

that and the Belgian. On that afternoon the old man had come into the box, had offered him a cigar, and had then suddenly dabbed something on his mouth, after which the signalman had remembered no more until he again came to his senses to find the guard in charge of his levers.

Crawford's tale was that he had watched his prisoner intently for some time, during which the man had not moved an eyelid. Convinced that he was either unconscious or dead, Crawford had stepped out on the line to see if his friends were returning, when he received a smashing blow on the head and fell stunned.

Colonel Livesay, having gathered thus much, decided what to do. He was of the 'hush it up' school, and at once bound every one over to secrecy. He had got that far when the second troop train arrived, and was stopped by signal. He went down and held a brief conversation with the officer in command.

The signalman said he was by that time recovered sufficiently to take over his duties again; but that Colonel Livesay would not allow. He learnt that the other signalman lived in a cottage not far away, and Oliver was despatched to find him and order him at once to take over the box.

Meanwhile Colonel Livesay, leaving the guard in charge of the box, ordered all the others to get into the train, and they went on to the nearest town, about two miles distant. Here the stationmaster was consulted, and he, after having been bound over to secrecy, made the necessary arrangements to ensure the safe running of the trains. Crawford had the cut on his head bound up by a local doctor, and the signalman was handed over to the custody of the

stationmaster. The Adjutant went on with the second train. Vivian, Skinner, and Crawford were ordered to return to their regiment, and, with Oliver, to remain there until they heard further from Colonel Livesay, who announced his intention of at once returning to London to report to the War Office.

Some half-hour later the subs., who managed to hire a motor-car in the town, found themselves bowling along toward the signal-box again in order to pick up Oliver.

'Thus ends a very pretty adventure,' said Vivian, as he settled himself comfortably on the back-seat.

'So I should say,' said Skinner; 'but it's all a mystery to me. I dared not ask any questions while that old Colonel, who put me in mind of a prosecuting counsel, was with us; but for Heaven's sake tell me what happened. It's a maddening mystery to me.'

Vivian related the events the reader already knows, and Skinner listened literally with open mouth.

'Here in England, right in the midst of thousands of troops! Why, upon my soul, I can hardly believe it!' he cried when Vivian had finished.

'You'll know more of German methods when you've been campaigning a bit,' said Vivian. 'But here we are at the signal-box.'

Oliver, who had roused the second signalman out of bed, was just starting back to camp; and, taking him in the car, away they went. They had to make a three-mile detour to reach a bridge by which they could cross the line, and then they rattled off to camp, which they reached about six o'clock. Vivian, as senior subaltern, told the others to say nothing of what had happened until he had seen the Colonel, who had then returned; and, Skinner and Crawford

going to their tents, Oliver and Vivian went off to find Colonel Hastings, whom both were anxious to see.

Colonel Hastings was a fine, martial-looking man, not much over fifty years of age, and he looked as fit and hale as though still of the age when, as a subaltern, he had fought in the Egyptian campaign, the medal and star for which were among his many decorations.

He was, of course, delighted to see his son, and scarcely less so to see Vivian, and the War Office would have been horrified to learn that the first five minutes were taken up talking of purely personal matters before a word was uttered on business. Then the youths told the Colonel what had happened; and, used only as he was to fighting honourable, though ofttimes savage, foes, the Colonel was both shocked and horrified at the tale he heard. He was not of the 'hush it up' school, and was for giving publicity to such a diabolical attempt, so that the British public might know the sort of foe it was fighting against, and might be doubly on its guard. But in the face of Colonel Livesay's action he could do nothing until the War Office view was learnt, and so silence was the order of the day. Not that the story could be kept quiet altogether; Crawford's bandaged head needed some explaining, and rumours were floating about that exaggerated the actual facts in a ludicrous manner.

At mess that evening Colonel Hastings, in a neat speech, welcomed the new officers, and added that though one of them was his own son, he might be pardoned for saying that they were all proud to number in their ranks two officers who had already seen much service against that foe whom they all hoped very soon to meet.

Skinner, who had dined generously, was smiling to himself as though on the best of terms with the world at large, and, if the truth must be told, was paying but little attention to the Colonel's remarks, when suddenly the import of the words, 'though one of them is my own son,' struck him. Dolt that he was, when Oliver had told him his name was Hastings he had remarked upon the coincidence, but it had never dawned upon him that he and the Colonel might be related even, let alone be father and son; and he remembered also that he had talked rather freely to Oliver about the Colonel. Horrified at the thought that what he had said might possibly get back to the Colonel's ears, and not noticing that his commanding officer was still speaking, he jumped to his feet, and looking round, blurted out, 'I say, Hastings, old chap'—— then stopped dead.
'Well, sir,' asked the Colonel in freezing tones,

'have you anything to say to me?'

'Yes-I mean, no, sir, not a word. That is, I was so surprised that I was going to speak to your son, and I-I'-

Harris pulled his friend down on to his chair and whispered, 'Shut up, you blundering lunatic! Don't

you see you're making an ass of yourself?'

'And acting in direct contravention of military etiquette,' growled Crawford; while Oliver, who saw and understood the reason for poor Skinner's sudden agitation, had to bury his face in his table-napkin to hide his smiles. Afterwards, when he explained the matter to his father, the Colonel, grim disciplinarian though he was, felt obliged to smile.

As soon as ever he could, Skinner disappeared from the table, only to be severely quizzed by his new acquaintances, and chaffed by Oliver and Harris.

Before the officers left the mess a telegram arrived for the Colonel, who, after reading it, called Vivian, Oliver, Skinner, and Crawford to him.

'I have just received a wire,' he said, 'which instructs me to give you orders to report yourselves at the War Office to-morrow morning. You will attend orderly-room before you start for London, that I may just cast my eye over you.'

Later Vivian and Oliver had a few words with the Colonel in his tent, and as they were making for

their own they met Skinner and Crawford.

'I say, you fellows, I don't half like this summons to London,' said Skinner. 'What do you think about it?'

'It may be your first step on the steep and

slippery ladder of promotion,' said Oliver.

'Or the "brass hats" \* may want you to give them a wrinkle on how to drop off to sleep at any hour or in

any company,' suggested Vivian gravely.

'More likely they'll want to cross-question us on the whole affair,' groaned Crawford; 'and if I get off without a court-martial for having allowed that scoundrel to escape I shall be lucky!'

<sup>\*</sup> Staff-officers.

### CHAPTER V.

### AN OFFICIAL INQUIRY.

THE first train by which the officers could get away for town on the following morning was not until after ten, and there was ample time before they started for a lecture from the Colonel as to how they should conduct themselves.

Skinner, who seemed to have a great awe of Colonel Hastings, was very quiet on the way to the station; but once he and the others were comfortably seated in a smoking compartment, with the prospect of a day in town before them, his naturally buoyant disposition asserted itself, and he chattered away gaily.

Crawford, whose head ached as a result of the crack he had received, seemed to be thinking deeply, and during a pause in the conversation he said to Vivian, 'Did I dream it, or did I not hear you say, when that fellow's false beard came off in the signal-box, that he was a man named something or other—I didn't quite catch what, but some one probably whom you had met abroad?'

'I did. Both Hastings and I had cause to know him very well.'

'Indeed! You know, that makes the whole affair doubly mysterious. If you've no objection, I should dearly like to hear all about that gentleman, and there's nothing like a yarn to beguile the tedium of a journey.'

'There really is not much to tell,' said Vivian, 'but such as there is you're welcome to. I may tell you that before the war I was in Germany, on business not altogether unconnected with the British Secret Service. I believe I at last came under the suspicion of the German Foreign Office, and the man whom I had employed as servant having been called away from Berlin on business, which I now believe to have been all a put-up affair, I engaged a man named Löffel, who came to me with the highest credentials. I don't know whether Löffel was aware that I always suspected him, but I did; and although he watched me like a cat, he never once caught me tripping. Having this fellow with me as a spy on my actions had its advantages, too; for, as they thought I was safe in his hands, my movements out of the house were untrammelled by the authorities.

'Just before the outbreak of war Hastings and I were in Mainz, and I knew Löffel was only waiting till war was declared to denounce me as a spy. We got to know how things were shaping just before the announcement, and played Master Löffel a trick which kept him quiet until we had got a good many miles away from Mainz. I can picture his rage when he found he was outwitted, for his is one of

those still natures whose passions run deep.

'Well, we saw nothing of him till we spied him in Liège during the siege, and though we made a dash for him, he managed to escape. We came across him again when we were prisoners in the hands of the Germans, and he did his best, by his evidence, to get us shot; but he didn't succeed in that even, and we eventually managed to escape. I never saw the man again until yesterday, and had long ago forgotten

him as one either shot or hanged, for he richly deserves either fate. He was the last man I should ever have thought would have ventured to England, for he spoke the language very poorly, and that was probably the reason why he gave himself out to be a Belgian.'

'You did not recognise him at first, I suppose?'

'Not in the slightest. If it hadn't been for his wig and beard coming off I should never have dreamt it was he. As it is, that wig and that pistol are valuable proofs against him if ever we catch him, though I doubt much whether we shall; he's far too cunning.'

From Waterloo a taxi conveyed the quartet to the end of Northumberland Avenue—Vivian was too diplomatic to drive right up to the classic doors of the War Office, at which such small fry as subalterns should arrive on foot. Each assumed an aspect of gravity, as becoming those who were about to enter the august presence of some of those brilliant luminaries who control the destinies of the British soldier.

In due course they were passed into a waitingroom, while a junior clerk patronisingly inquired their business, left them for some time, then shipped them off to another part of the building and handed them over to a second young gentleman, who eventually brought them to their destination.

Here they were ushered into a room, at the table of which sat four people, one a red-faced, choleric old colonel in uniform, the others civilians. At the centre of the table was a middle-aged man, with fair hair cut till it looked like a hogged mane, and wearing large glasses. A stout, comfortable-looking

gentleman sat beside the bristly-haired official, while the fourth was evidently a shorthand clerk.

The subs. were accommodated with chairs, and then the spectacled gentleman questioned and cross-questioned them all, constantly referring to voluminous notes.

The elderly colonel fidgeted, cleared his throat, and drummed his fingers in a very impatient way; and when Vivian explained that he threw the 'foreigner,' as he was instructed to call Löffel, out of the signal-box, he broke out with, 'And why, sir, didn't you take proper means to secure him? Surely there were enough of you?'

'I handed him over to Mr Crawford's care.'

'Bah, sir! as senior officer you should have done that yourself. Why on earth didn't you?'

'Because, sir,' replied Vivian firmly but respectfully, 'I never gave the man another thought. It seemed to me that it was more important to prevent a catastrophe to several hundred British subjects than to ensure the capture of a miserable German

spy.'

'Tut, tut, sir'— began the Colonel, when the bristly-haired gentleman, whose name was Rowley, said, 'Pardon me, Colonel, this inquiry is purely a civilian one so far. You are here in case I want military opinion;' and while the Colonel blew his nose violently, Mr Rowley said to Vivian coldly, 'Are you aware, sir, that the identity of the person you so glibly describe as a German spy has not been established? Do you know that such rash assertions, if made outside, may lead his Majesty's Government into serious trouble?'

'I was not aware of it,' replied Vivian. 'I was

under the impression that we were at war with Germany.'

Here Oliver almost betrayed himself by laughing out loud.

'And what if we are, sir? Do you not realise that, though the military population may be killing each other, we civil servants still observe the ordinary decencies of civilised diplomatic circles?'

'Quite so.'

- 'And do you not know that to make unfounded accusations against anybody is against the law—the civil law—and is also likely to act to your prejudice in your advancement in the army?'
  - 'I am fully aware of it.'
  - 'Then why do you do it?'
  - 'I did not.'
- 'You did not! But you described this person as a German spy!'
  - 'And so he was.'
  - 'You persist?'
  - 'Most emphatically.'
  - 'Can you prove your words?'
  - 'Easily.'
  - 'Then do so.'

Vivian, in calm tones, related how he had recognised Löffel, and what he knew of him beforehand.

Mr Rowley looked very much taken aback, until a sudden inspiration seemed to seize him. 'Of course, what you say will be placed on record, and is valuable evidence, but you might be mistaken. You admit that you saw the man's face for only a few moments.'

<sup>&#</sup>x27;Quite so.'

<sup>&#</sup>x27;And uncorroborated evidence will not convict.

That is clearly laid down in the King's Regulations concerning courts-martial.'

'True.'

- 'Then I still say you should have been more careful in rashly describing this unknown person as a German spy on your own suspicion alone.'
  - 'I have not done so.'
  - 'You have a witness, then?'
  - 'I have, sir.'
  - 'Why did you not say so before?'
- 'Because I have not as yet been asked,' replied Vivian, as calmly as ever. 'Mr Hastings, here, also knew Löffel in Germany; he was with me on more than one occasion when we ran up against him in his capacity as spy, and he is as convinced as I am that the man who attempted to wreck the train was Löffel himself.'

Mr Rowley looked abashed. He had apparently been trying to make light of the whole affair, and had it not been for the wig and the pistol, was inclined to regard the idea of the foreigner in the signal-box as somewhat exaggerated. But by the identification of Löffel the wind was taken out of his sails. He very soon concluded his inquiry, thanked the officers, told them that they must observe the greatest secrecy in the matter, as if these things got abroad they did a lot of harm—he did not say to whom—and then dismissed them.

'Well, I'm'— began Oliver when they were once more on the pavement in Whitehall.

'Yes, I know,' laughed Vivian; 'don't excite your-self. When you've seen as much of a certain side of civilian official life as I have—mind, I say a

C

certain side—you'll not be surprised at our experience of this morning.'

'To think of military men—British officers,' said Crawford—'being subjected to cross-examination by a civilian understrapper—why'—

'Hush, Crawford!' laughed Oliver; 'don't speak slightingly of the man who might have sent you

before a court-martial for losing a prisoner.'

'I was afraid I should have got into trouble,' said Crawford. 'I deserved it. But if I wasn't vastly mistaken, Mr Rowley was jolly glad the fellow Löffel escaped, and thus prevented the whole affair becoming public.'

'Look here, what's the use of worrying about the thing?' said Skinner. 'It doesn't matter to us, after all. I suppose the big-wigs in the War Office know how to manage their own affairs best, the same as my dad knows how to manage his business, which always seemed to me a jolly silly way. But he made a lot of money out of it. So let's have lunch, and don't worry.'

'Sound advice,' agreed Oliver, and the whole of them went off westward.

### CHAPTER VI.

# CHEERY DICK 'TAKES OVER.'

In his knowledge of London, Skinner easily took first place among the four, and he piloted them to a restaurant where they lunched comfortably and well. Availing themselves of Colonel Hastings's permission, given before they left camp, they devoted the afternoon to a theatre, where the principal part of the audience was soldiers—for, since they were doing all that lay in their power for 'King and Country,' they had a perfect right to enjoy themselves; then, catching the evening train, they arrived safely in camp.

The Colonel was amused at their version of what happened at the War Office, and told them that in all probability they had heard the last of the incident

-which proved to be the case.

The police were put on the track of Löffel, but they never found him; he had completely disappeared. The signalman was severely reprimanded 'for allowing a stranger to enter his box, contrary to the regulations of the company,' but beyond that he was not punished. The local papers got hold of a version of the affair, but the whole truth never leaked out; and the London papers, thanks perhaps to the Censor, did not even allude to what might have been one of the most terrible railway accidents of modern times.

The only real effect the attempt had was to cause

a military guard to be mounted at the cutting in future; and, as the Wessex Fusiliers had the honour of supplying that guard, many a sentry, as he walked his lonely beat on a drenching wet night, hoped that the man through whose misdeed he was there might receive his deserts with heaped measure.

Oliver and Vivian soon settled down in their new regiment; and though the work was hard, the time passed pleasantly. Skinner found on several occasions that the Colonel was not so lamb-like as Oliver had made out, and he soon learnt that he had not by any means done with the drill-book. Crawford, on the other hand, was delighted with his Colonel, and talked enthusiastically of parapets, revetments, rapid-fire, bombs, high explosives, asphyxiating gases, and the hundred-and-one other things that a subaltern ought to understand in the present war. He liked to learn from actual experience, as Harris preferred learning from books, and so the two seemed never tired of discussing the relative merits of practice and precept. On account of his peculiarities, Crawford was generally spoken of amongst his brother-officers as the 'General;' Harris was known as the 'Fiddler,' because he played exceedingly well upon the violin; and by an admixture of Skinner's names with his father's business he was dubbed the 'Norman Sausage,' 'Sausage Skinner,' or simply 'Sausage.'

The day's work generally commenced with an hour of Swedish drill, which Skinner, who was inclined to be stout, heartily detested. When possible, he evaded the drill, and when he could not, performed it in a rather lackadaisical manner. The Adjutant, a remarkably keen-eyed officer, noticed this proclivity of Skinner's, and several times fell foul of him about

it. But Skinner lapsed frequently, and the Adjutant thought of a way to cure him. The recruits took a course of Swedish drill in the afternoon under a non-commissioned officer, and one evening Skinner was horrified to read in orders that he was to take the recruits in Swedish drill 'until further orders.' His fellow-subs. laughed at him, and rather enjoyed the joke, making a point of whispering to him as they passed him on the parade-ground while he was taking his perspiring class, 'Cheer up, old fellow, and Gott strafe Sweden.'

Oliver and Vivian, accustomed to the regular soldier, found the Territorial somewhat different. The majority of the men came from the middle classes, and a sprinkling even from the upper. They were more intelligent than the ordinary Tommy, learned more quickly, and always endeavoured to understand the reason of the various movements and evolutions they had to perform. There was an enthusiasm quite their own amongst them, and a striving to 'get on with the job,' so that they might the sooner get to the front, help to bring the war to a finish, and return to their civil occupations; for very few of them loved soldiering for its own sake, but found themselves soldiers on purely patriotic grounds. 'Smartness,' as understood by the regular soldier, was deficient. The drill-sergeants, mostly old soldiers, did their best, but the Wessex did not see the reason for it; and though sentries efficiently performed the duties assigned to them, and soldiers saluted their officers punctiliously, there was not that 'cut' about the movements that Vivian had been used to in the Guards.

'I dare say it will work out all right,' he said to

Oliver one day when they happened to be discussing the matter; 'but it is not exactly according to the old traditions of the army. The men are keen enough, but they don't attain that automaton-like precision which we have always been led to believe inseparable from real discipline. There's no doubt this is a "new army" in more ways than one.'

'I expect they'll fight all right,' replied Oliver, 'and that's the main thing.'

'I hope so, though I sometimes wonder whether they don't study the theory of the thing a bit too much. The man who obeys blindly is probably less liable to get panicky.'

'Well, Vivian, in the words of a celebrated Cabinet Minister, we must "wait and see."

The friends were still talking when a sergeant of their company approached, and, saluting, said that Private Rock requested a few words with either of them. Oliver and Vivian looked up, and beheld behind the sergeant a man who was presumably the person in question.

Private Rock, doomed to play a not unimportant part in the following pages, was standing rigidly at attention, heels together, toes at an angle of forty-five degrees, body erect, palms of his hands pressed against his thighs, eyes looking squarely to his front. He was of medium size, clean-shaven, with a face absolutely devoid of expression. He might have been any age from thirty to fifty, was scrupulously clean, and, what was very unusual in the Wessex Fusiliers, he wore a double row of medal-ribbons on his breast.

'Well, my man, what do you want?' asked Vivian.

'To be your servant, sir,' replied Rock.

'But I don't want a servant,' said Vivian, in some surprise. 'I've got one.'

'I shouldn't ha' thought so, sir, by the look o' the tent,' sniffed Rock. 'Mucked-up; that's what I calls it.'

Oliver could not help smiling. 'You're somewhat

outspoken in your opinions,' he remarked.

'Always was, sir, from the first day I joined the drums. "Call a spade a spade," I says. When shall I take over?'

'I've told you we have a man,' repeated Vivian.

'Look 'ere, sir,' went on Rock, unbending from his stiff attitude of attention, 'you're a Guardsman, I'm told, and you'll know what things are. I've done my twenty-three in the old Fightin' Fifth, and I reckon they know what things are. Now, speakin' together, as one soldier what's got honours on 'is breast to another what's got the same, I ask you, are you content to 'ave your traps an' belongin's mucked about by a bloomin' Terrier who, I dessay, six months ago was hoein' taters or drivin' a quill?'

'Speak more respectfully, Rock,' interposed the sergeant sharply.

Private Rock gave the sergeant a look evidently intended to wither him up. 'I knows my duty, sargint,' he said, laying particular stress upon the last word. 'I could 'ave 'ad the "dog's elbow" [stripes] on my arm half-a-dozen times since I joined this crowd if I'd ha' wanted 'em, or I could ha' bin the Colonel's or Adjutant's servant, both of 'em soldiers, mind you—real soldiers. I've fought in four campaigns, an' I've soldiered in every quarter o' the world, an' don't you forget it. I've served under

Wolseley'—Wolsey he called it—'an' Evelyn Wood, Johnny French an' Ian Hamilton, Kitchener, an' poor old "Bobs," who was worth the whole lot.'

'My good fellow,' said Vivian impatiently, 'don't speak of our most illustrious Generals in that way.'

'No offence, sir; I'm speakin' of orficers who knew Dick Rock as well as they knew their own families. I may say they was friends o' mine.'

'Well, you cut along,' said Vivian, 'and I'll speak to the Colonel about the matter. About turn! Quick

march!'

Like an automaton, Rock saluted, pivoted round, and marched away. When he was out of sight both Vivian and Oliver had to smile.

'Where on earth did you find that curiosity, sergeant?' asked the former.

'He joined us some months ago, sir,' replied the sergeant. 'He never ought to have been accepted, for he's years over the age, but he said he was thirty-eight. He's spent all his life in the army, I believe, and he'll argue on parade with the Adjutant himself. He's been offered stripes, which he refused; and to get him out of the ranks—for there's no doubt he's forgotten more about drill than most of us ever knew—the Colonel made him an orderly, and he hangs about criticising everything. He spins yarns by the hour, and is the most confirmed grumbler and pessimist in the regiment, for which the men have christened him Cheery Dick.'

'Well, I'm sure we ought to feel honoured with his offer of service,' laughed Oliver.

'He said the first time he saw you and Mr Drummond that he would be your servant, sir.'

'The deuce he did! Well, we shall see,' said Vivian;

and, the sergeant departing, he and Oliver had a good laugh about the matter.

That afternoon, on coming to their tent after parade, what was the surprise of both of them to find that their belongings had been rearranged, the beds shifted, trunks stowed away, and two deck-chairs substituted, a new looking-glass hung on the tent-pole, a small bamboo table covered with a gaudy tablecloth provided, with a pickle-bottle full of cut flowers standing upon it! And there, seated in one of the chairs, smoking a pipe, was Cheery Dick, looking quite at ease and perfectly at home.

He rose and saluted the officers. 'Everything all correct, gentlemen?' he said.

'But what are you doing here?' asked Vivian.

'I've taken over, sir,' replied Rock.

'Where's our own man?'

'Gone back to 'is platoon, where 'e ought to be, a-learnin' of 'is work, instead o' loafin' about 'ere,' replied Rock. 'You gentlemen are real soldiers, an' ave got to be looked after by a real soldier.' And, saluting again, he left the tent.

'Well, of all the dashed impudence!' cried Vivian.

'I've a good mind to order him under arrest.'

'Let him alone, Vivian,' grinned Oliver; 'he's as good as a tonic, and he knows his business, too. Just look how comfortable he's made things.'

'But, my dear boy, he's actually ordering us about.'

'Never mind; let's ask the pater about it to-night.'

And so they did.

Colonel Hastings laughed heartily. 'Stick to the old rascal, boys,' he said. 'He's one of those old

soldiers that are a perfect nuisance in a battalion like ours. He's a walking drill-book, with a chronic grievance; he'd stir up strife in a regiment of saints if he set his mind to it. I've given him several jobs to keep him off parade and out of the men's way. If he doesn't settle down with you I shall have to get rid of him. But he's a good soldier, and I should be sorry to do that; so keep him, and see what you can do with him. It will keep him out of mischief.'

'Very well,' agreed Vivian, who would have done anything to please the Colonel; 'we'll give him a trial.' And so it came to pass that Cheery Dick took Oliver and Vivian under his charge.

## CHAPTER VII.

#### CRAWFORD GOES TRENCH-DIGGING.

AY by day the Wessex Fusiliers improved in drill and discipline. Hard work was the order of the day, and the men ably seconded the efforts of the officers. The Colonel was a strict disciplinarian, and the Adjutant a splendid drill. The latter, though a younger man, had seen almost as much service as Rock himself. He had won a well-merited commission from the ranks in the days when such a feat was almost as rare as winning the Victoria Cross; and, having retired from the army on a pension, at the first call for men, like so many other valiant old soldiers, had given up a lucrative civil employment and returned to stand by his country in its hour of danger. The debt which the Empire owes to such men will not be fully realised until the storm and stress of the war is over, and the Napier or the Kinglake who is fated with his pen to render immortal the deeds now being performed has given his work to the world.

Trench-digging formed a large part of the work of the Wessex, and great was the rivalry between the different platoons as to which could perform its allotted task in the shortest time.

Crawford was a great enthusiast at digging; while Harris was always inventing new methods of piling up the earth to form the parapet, of shoring up the sides, or of effectively roofing. Skinner voted the whole business a bore, and confessed that, next to Swedish drill, he hated trench-work most. 'Upon my word,' he said at mess one evening, after having spent eleven hours in pouring rain superintending the completion of some existing trenches—'upon my word, this trench-work is about the limit. I think I'd almost as soon be a quill-driver as a navvy.'

'You haven't begun the real thing yet, Sausage,' said Crawford cheerfully. 'Wait till you're doing the same work with Jack Johnsons dropping all

round you, and bullets buzzing by like flies.'

'Well, so long as the bullets do buzz by, and the shells only fall round and not on me, I dare say it will add a little interest to what I must say is at present a very dirty, laborious, and monotonous job,' grumbled Skinner.

The trenches were generally dug in a large field some two miles from the camp, and a subaltern was often given a written order to proceed to such and such a spot, take so many men, and entrench them in a certain way, the time taken and the effectiveness of the shelter being considered by the field officers, and a lecture afterwards given upon the result.

On the day after Skinner had treated his fellowsubs. to his views on trench-digging, Crawford was given written instructions, and at 6.30 A.M. on the following morning, a very fine one, marched his men off to the trench field. Duly arrived there, he fell out his men, and, calling over his sergeant, produced his instructions. 'Now, Tompkins,' he said, 'I want to-day to beat all previous records.'

'Yes, sir,' said Tompkins.

<sup>&#</sup>x27;Five hundred yards due east from reserve trench

B 4,' read Crawford from his paper. 'Now this is B 4 at the end of which we are standing, I think, sergeant.'

'Yes, sir; there's the marking post, B 4 reserve.'

'Good! Now, "five hundred yards due east from reserve B 4, break ground, open trench exactly at right angles to B 4, and dig in on a front of twenty yards two feet deep. Afford men best cover possible, so as to enable them to offer the greatest resistance until assistance arrives." Perfectly clear, I think, sergeant?'

'Quite, sir.'

'The tape, then; and tell the men to get tunics off and tools ready for an immediate start.—Corporal Butt, hold the end of the tape, and stand exactly on this spot.—Sergeant, tell off half-a-dozen men with marking-pegs.'

While this was being done Crawford took the exact bearing of east with his compass, and in a few minutes was measuring off the distance in hundreds of yards, a man driving in a peg to mark each

hundred, and remaining standing on the spot.

'Hallo!' cried Crawford when the fourth man had been posted; 'that's funny. We shall be bang against the wall there.'

Sergeant Tompkins had been thinking the same

thing.

Right in front of them was the wall encircling the grounds of a very large house that fronted on the main road, which ran at right angles to one side of the field. Not much was known to the troops about the house except that it was named Tintagel, and that the present owner of the property was a retired naval officer.

Now the wall was a serious obstacle, and for a moment Crawford was puzzled.

'Some mistake, sir,' suggested the sergeant.

'Perhaps so,' agreed Crawford, taking out his typewritten instructions; 'let's check.' He carefully wiped and adjusted his glasses and re-read his instructions: 'Five hundred yards due east from reserve trench B 4. That's a "5," I think, sergeant?'

'Undoubtedly, sir.'

'And this is due east,' looking at his compass.

'Due east exactly.'

'Now let's re-measure the distance.'

This was done, and it exactly coincided with the first measurement.

'Four hundred and eighty yards. Then our point is twenty yards the other side the wall.'

'Can't be, sir; can it?'

'Why not?'

'How are we going to get over the wall?'

Crawford looked pityingly at his sergeant. 'Call yourself a soldier,' he said, 'and ask how are we going to get over a wall? Did you ever hear of Badajoz, of the Redan, of Delhi?'

'Well, this isn't active service, sir. Seems more like a mistake to me.'

'Good heavens, sergeant, has it come to this, that non-commissioned officers are going to criticise the orders of their superiors just because they cannot understand them? Do you see that this paper bears the Adjutant's signature, and do you dare insinuate that he doesn't know what he's doing? What would the men of Marlborough's or Wellington's time have thought of such conduct? The first duty of a soldier is obedience, sergeant—blind, unquestioning obedience;

and you've got to obey, and I've got to obey. Do you understand?'

'Quite, sir; but what are you going to do?'
'I'm going to open a trench twenty yards the other side that wall, and I'm going to start at once. Now, you go and bring the platoon up here at the double, all excepting the men by the

pegs.'

While the sergeant was gone Crawford, remembering the lessons of the gymnasium, measured the height of the wall. His breast swelled with ardour at the idea of the Wessex Fusiliers storming it; and as the sergeant brought the men up at the double he was about to give the order, when it occurred to him that it might look infra dig. to be seen scrambling up over an eight-foot wall, and that there could not possibly be much glory in the enterprise. So he ordered his men to put on their caps and tunics, and shoulder the entrenching tools, and, forming them in fours, placed himself at their head. He had made up his mind boldly to demand an entrance to the estate; and so away they went alongside the wall, out on to the road, and up to the lodge gates. These were closed, but the subaltern boldly pulled the iron bell-handle, and, not being answered very quickly, gave the gate a good rattle.

A short, red-faced man appeared, and stared roundeyed at the khaki-clad figures standing outside the gate. He unlocked it, however, and, opening it, said a little doubtfully to Crawford, 'Morning, sir. You're an early caller, aren't you?'
'Sorry if I've disturbed you,' replied Crawford

coolly; 'but I must march my men through the grounds.'

'What's up?' replied the lodgekeeper. 'Are the Germans here?'

'No, not so bad as that,' replied Crawford. 'It is only a military necessity.'

'Military necessity, is it?' said the lodgekeeper. 'I suppose you've got the Admiral's permission?'

'What Admiral?' asked Crawford in surprise.

'What Admiral!' replied the lodgekeeper, getting very red in the face. 'What Admiral! Why, the Admiral o' course; the Admiral as owns this 'ere property, an' who ain't perticler fond o' you sojer chaps; couldn't abide the "Jollies" [Marines] even aboard his own vessel. So if you ain't got permission you'd better look out for squalls.'

'My good fellow,' replied Crawford, producing his orders, 'this is my permission, and this,' pointing to his uniform, 'is my warrant. If I overstep my duty I am ready to answer to my commanding officer; and if you or any one else attempts to hinder me in the execution of my duty, you will have to answer to my commanding officer also.'

The red-faced lodgekeeper stared a moment or two at Crawford, turned a quid in his mouth, and spat on a flower-bed.

The little officer felt that he was wasting time; and, turning to his men, he shouted in his best parade-ground voice, 'Squad—'shun! Quick march—left wheel!'

The lodgekeeper stepped forward and placed one hand on Crawford's arm. 'I resists,' he said.

'Resist me at your peril,' retorted Crawford haughtily; 'I'm on the King's service, and you are breaking the law.'

Sergeant Tompkins, who was a big man, seeing his

little officer molested, doubled forward, for Crawford was a favourite with the men. 'Hands off!' he cried, 'or you'll meet with an accident.'

'I resists,' repeated the lodgekeeper sturdily; and then he was brushed aside by the advancing platoon. He watched them pass, and smiled darkly to himself; then he followed them at a distance, saw Crawford lead his men straight to the far end of the grounds, mount the wall, and signalling over it, receive the end of a tape-measure in his hand. A certain distance was measured, a little white peg stuck into the ground, right in the very middle of an asparagus-bed, and then the nonchalant Tommies, walking about among the asparagus, peeled off their tunics, rolled up their shirt-sleeves, and handled their spades and picks, while Crawford and the sergeant continued their measuring and pegging.

Asparagus-growing was a great hobby with the Admiral, and the lodgekeeper stared aghast at the Tommies. 'Bu'st me,' he muttered, 'if ever I see such a thing! Bloomin' sojers, too! Well, if that young gent with the barnacles ain't in for the time of his life I'm not Dave Transom. I'll let 'em have time to get settled, and then—and then—you bogtrotting militiamen, we'll see whether the Admiral approves of this 'ere diggin'. I 'ope none of yer'll find you've been diggin' yer own graves; but if it do so happen, well'—— And, spitting once more, David Transom, late petty officer in his Majesty's Navy, rolled his way solemnly towards the house.

## CHAPTER VIII.

#### SOLDIERS VERSUS SAILORS.

DEAR-ADMIRAL SIR ALGERNON BLUNT was a sailor more of the old school than of the new. Always possessed of ample means, it had been the love of the sea that had kept him in the navy, in which service he had risen to high distinction. When the period of his last command expired, and he had to haul down his flag, he came back to his magnificent estate of Tintagel full of regrets at leaving the service he loved, with no enthusiasm for a life ashore, and with a sort of resentful feeling towards all landsmen, more especially towards soldiers, whom he looked upon as being the most bigoted of all landsmen. He developed a grumpy manner and the gout, surrounded himself with old sailors, ran Tintagel on man-o'-war lines, mixed but little with the neighbouring gentry, and took no recreation except motoring. With the manner of a bear he combined the voice of a lion and the kindness of heart of a child. One of his favourite amusements was swimming, and he had constructed a very fine bath in the grounds. It was his custom to have an early morning swim, at which he was attended by his valet, an ex-navy steward.

David Transom made his way to the bath with the idea of finding his master. The Admiral had, however, finished his swim, and returned to the house. Thither David followed him, and in due time found the valet. 'Admiral about?' he asked.

'Shaving'

'I want a word with him.'

'You know his rule: all complaints and reports to be made to him in his cabin'—he called his smoking-room his cabin—'at 9 A.M.'

'This is a special case.'

'I'll see what can be done.' The valet disappeared, returning in a minute, saying, 'The Admiral will see you.'

David held his cap in the approved naval style, and stepped gingerly into the Admiral's dressing-room.

Sir Algernon Blunt was some six feet high, very stout, with a face the colour of beetroot, and snow-white beard and hair. He was busy at his toilet, and turned round fiercely on the diffident David, a hair-brush in each hand. 'Hallo!' he cried; 'how's this? What have you left your post for?'

'To make a report, Admiral.' It is worthy of note that he would always be called Admiral, and not Sir Algernon.

'Get on with it, then, and don't stand there mouthing like a Maltese monkey!'

'I've been assaulted, Admiral.'

'You've been what?' asked the Admiral.

'Assaulted, Admiral, by a sojer.'

'A soldier!' roared the Admiral. 'You a sailor, and let a soldier assault you when you've got a pair of fists of your own!'

'It wasn't one, Admiral; it was about fifty.'

The Admiral threw his brushes on the dressing-table, and made a step forward. 'You gibbering lubber, what is the matter with you?' he bellowed. 'What's all this talk of soldiers? Where are they, and what are they doing?'

'In the kitchen-garden, stamping about on the asparagus-beds,' replied David slowly.

The Admiral dropped into an arm-chair. 'In the

what?' he asked incredulously.

David repeated his statement.

The Admiral looked as though he could not credit his ears. 'Tell your tale out quickly, my man,' he said presently, 'or you'll find yourself in the bilboes' (nautical = irons).

David related what had happened.

Hardly had he finished when the Admiral leapt to his feet. 'Fetch Mr Claud,' he yelled.

'The Colonel, Admiral?' queried David.

'Mr Claud, I said!' roared Sir William. 'Don't talk to me about colonels. Pipe all hands to quarters! Clear the decks for action; issue small arms; warn a landing-party!' And David, not waiting to hear more, departed.

The Admiral's younger brother, Colonel Claud Blunt, was heir to the property, and, as he frequently did, was staying there. He was the direct opposite of his choleric brother in looks and manner; but a real affection existed between them, and they agreed on most things except upon their professions, the Admiral loathing all things military, and only alluding to his brother by his military rank when he was in a very good temper; while the Colonel had a real detestation for the sea.

While the Admiral was issuing his orders, Crawford was setting his men to work, and picks and shovels were just getting busy, when Sergeant Tompkins, looking up, cried out to his officer, 'Hallo, sir, what's this coming?'

Crawford peered up through his glasses, and saw

a number of men approaching. They were led by Sir Algernon in his shirt-sleeves, waving his arms and bellowing orders. Next to him came a slim figure in immaculate khaki, a monocle in his eye, and his hands in his pockets. Behind the two were about a dozen men, all old salts, some armed with sticks, and all wearing a very truculent look.

'Bless me!' exclaimed Crawford, 'whatever can be the matter?'

The answer was supplied by the Admiral roaring out, 'Avast there, you pirates! What are you doing?'

'I reckon we're trench-digging,' grinned a Tommy, leaning on his spade, and looking in amusement at the irate Sir Algernon.

'Who's in charge of you trespassing militiamen? Where's your officer, if that's what you call the leader of such rascals?'

Crawford slowly buttoned up his tunic, adjusted his cap, and then, stepping in front of Sir Algernon, replied, 'I am in command of this platoon, sir, and if you have anything to say, will you kindly address your remarks to me?'

The Admiral glared down at the little officer. 'I have got something to say, and that to the point. I want to know what the deuce you're doing here.'

'I'm carrying out my orders.'

'Whose orders?' bellowed the Admiral. 'I'm the only one who gives orders here.'

'Indeed!' replied Crawford coolly. 'Well, I'm carrying out the orders of my commanding officer.'

'And what the dickens do I care for your commanding officer? Do you think he has any power to give you permission to trespass on my property, you four-eyed little toad?'

'I must caution you to speak more respectfully to one whose proud privilege it is to hold the King's commission, or else I shall find a way to make you.'

'King's commission, you little powder-monkey! Why, I held her Majesty's commission before you were born.'

'Then I am surprised to hear you speak so. I always understood officer and gentleman were synonymous terms.'

'Why, you rascal, you convict-clad hop-o'-my-thumb, I'd throw you overboard as soon as look at you! Call off these navvies, or soldiers, or whatever they are, or I'll clear you out with my men.'

'If you raise a finger against us you'll rue it. I warn you that you will be committing an offence under the Defence of the Realm Act.'

'Defence of the fiddlestick Act! Your place is over in France, and that's where you'd better go. Now, are you going to clear out?'

'I am not.'

'Then over the wall with them, boys,' cried the Admiral; and he made a grab at Crawford.

'Fix bayonets! Form company!' shouted Crawford.
'No! Charge spades! I mean.'

'Draw cutlasses! Repel boarders!' yelled the Admiral; and, his men closing up, in a few moments a serious scuffle would have ensued had not the Admiral's brother—who, hardly able to restrain his laughter, had listened to the two excited disputants—stepped in between the parties.

'Hold!' he cried loudly, throwing up both his hands.

'Out of the way, Claud,' yelled the Admiral; 'an Englishman's home is his castle. These fellows are trespassers, and I'll clear 'em out.—At 'em, boys!'

'Let no man move,' continued the Colonel.—'Drop those shovels,' to the soldiers.—'Allow me to get you an explanation, Sir Algernon,' to his brother.—Then to Crawford, 'You see, sir, I am a colonel in his Majesty's Army—Claud Blunt, Royal Engineers. I presume you have authority for your action?'

Crawford wrested himself free from the Admiral's grasp, saluted, and, producing his instructions, said, 'I have, sir. I am ordered to open a trench at the position here indicated. If you will have the goodness to examine this paper you will perceive I am

acting in accordance with my orders.'

Colonel Blunt returned the salute, read the paper, asked Crawford for his full instructions, how he had measured his distances, looked over the wall at the pegs, and said, 'It all seems in order. May I suggest that there is an error somewhere, perhaps, in the measurement? Will you come with me and verify it?'

'If you will pardon me, I would rather remain with my men. I will send my sergeant if you like.'

'I checked the measurements; they are quite right, sir,' said the sergeant.

'Then your instructions may contain some error.'

'Possibly, sir,' replied Crawford; 'but, as you know, a soldier dare not question his instructions. He has only to carry them out.'

'Quite true,' agreed the Colonel gravely, though there was a twinkle in his eye.—'I see nothing for it, Sir Algernon, but to allow these men to continue their work.'

'Continue their work?' cried the Admiral. 'The

first man that sticks another pick in the ground I'll throw over that wall.'

'It's a serious business in these times interfering with soldiers while in the execution of their duty,' said his brother.

'Duty be hanged! Do you think it's their duty to spoil my asparagus? Claud, you're a fool, and I'll have no more palaver.—Now,' to Crawford, 'are you going?'

'I am not.'

'Then look out;' and the Admiral turned to his men to order them to 'carry on,' when the Colonel

again interposed.

'We seem to have arrived at an *impasse*,' he said to Crawford; 'but I think I see a way out of it. Will you come with me to your commanding officer and lay the matter before him?'

'I cannot leave my men, sir.'

'But you will subject your men to violence if you do not.'

Crawford looked at the Colonel in surprise. 'British soldiers hardly consider that, sir, when their duty lies clear.'

'True,' replied the Colonel, biting his lip; 'but come, as your superior officer I must order you to submit this to your C.O. I am sure a mistake has been made.'

'Very well, then, I will go if this—this gentleman'—— and he nodded towards the Admiral.

'My brother, Admiral Sir Algernon Blunt.'

'Oh—h,' said Crawford, a little taken aback. 'Well, he will have to go with me as my prisoner.'

'What?' roared the Admiral. 'What-your what?'

'My prisoner,' replied Crawford coolly. 'You have

obstructed me in the execution of my duty; you have insulted me, and laid hands on me. I would place you under arrest if you were the Lord High Admiral himself.

Sir Algernon looked aghast at Crawford's assurance. Before the Admiral could say anything, the Colonel came to the rescue. 'I see a way of settling this,' he said. 'If you will send your sergeant with me, I will go to your commanding officer and hear what he says.'

'I agree to that on condition that Sir Algernon promises not to interfere with us until you return.'

'He will do that,' said the Colonel hastily, 'on condition that you suspend work for that period.'

'I will give you one hour,' said Crawford, looking at his watch. 'If you haven't returned by that time, I'll continue my work even if Sir Algernon brings

up a field battery to back up his men.'

'I'll run over in my brother's motor,' said the Colonel. 'Will you tell your sergeant to accompany me?-Come, Algernon, we'll go together; a spin will do you good;' and, taking his brother by the arm, he led him away, and the Admiral's men followed.

'Rest easy, men,' said Crawford as they disappeared. 'You may put on your tunics and light your pipes; but let no one move from the spot until we hear

from our own commanding officer.'

# CHAPTER IX.

#### CHEERY DICK CRITICISES.

CRAWFORD and his men had not very long to wait. Before the hour was up the sound of a motor-car was heard, and five minutes later Colonel Hastings, with Sir Algernon and his brother, came striding through the grounds. Crawford had his men standing at attention before the Colonel approached him, and, on being called to his commanding officer, saluted and waited to be addressed.

'Mr Crawford,' said Colonel Hastings, 'I am afraid an error has been made. It was certainly not intended to encroach upon Sir Algernon Blunt's property. Let me see your orders.'

Crawford handed them over.

The Colonel read them. 'Yes,' he said, 'I have the adjutant's original draft in my pocket. The orderly-room sergeant in typing it out put a 5 instead of a 3. The distance should have read "three hundred yards."'

'I am sorry, sir.'

'No blame attaches to you, Mr Crawford. You have carried out your orders to the letter. Perhaps'—and here there was the slightest suspicion of a smile upon the Colonel's lips—'this was a case where a reference to your commanding officer might have saved us all some trouble.'

'I should have done so had I thought I was doing right, sir. But on page 145 of the Soldier's Pocket-

Book it is distinctly laid down that an officer should implicitly obey his orders.'

'That is so, though I rather fancy it says an officer is to act "intelligently" upon the order. However, we must no longer intrude. We can only offer Sir Algernon our apologies, and retire.'

'I regret, Sir Algernon,' said Crawford, stepping up to the Admiral, 'that I have intruded here. I read my orders so, and was bound to carry them out.'

'And as an officer of the Senior Service, you know, Algernon,' said Colonel Blunt to his brother, 'that the unquestioning obedience to an order is what has made British sailors and soldiers what they are.'

The tactful reference of Colonel Blunt to the Senior Service clearly pleased the Admiral. 'Tut, tut!' he said, 'the affair is all over; say no more about it. And, da—bless my eyes, sir,' to Crawford, 'you're a plucky beggar! I used hard words to you just now which I did not mean. I'm a hot-tempered old fool, and I'm sorry.'

'Don't mention it, sir,' said Crawford.

'Nay, lad, shake hands, and forgive the hasty words of an old sea-dog. You ought to have gone into the navy. You'd have made a fine sailor, and I'm sure the Germans—rotten sailors they always were—will get all they want from you when you cross the water;' and he gripped Crawford's hand in a way that brought tears into the subaltern's eyes.

When Sir Algernon said that a man would make a good sailor he was paying him the highest compliment in his power, and Colonel Blunt knew by his words that his brother was in a good temper. 'Well, let's retire inside "and splice the mainbrace," as my brother would say,' he exclaimed. 'March your men off, and continue your work, reading three hundred for five hundred,' said Colonel Hastings to Crawford.

Then, as the three seniors went towards the house, Crawford, in his most sonorous voice, shouted, 'Right dress! form fours—left! By your left—quick march! Right wheel!' and, placing himself in front of his men, with head erect he led them off, looking straight to his front, and taking no notice of the grinning David as he passed through the gates.

An account of the affair soon spread through the camp, and all but the unfortunate clerk who had made the mistake in typing enjoyed the joke.

Cheery Dick freely gave Oliver and Vivian his views that afternoon when they returned from parade. 'Nice show up for the reg'ment that 'ere Mr Crawford 'ave given us,' he growled, as he polished up a boot.

'Don't make personal remarks, Rock,' said Vivian.

'I don't call that personal,' persisted Rock; 'it's reg'mental. A buttin' in an' givin' lip to a' Admiral! Any fool 'u'd a known 'e 'adn't got ter go trespassin'. This turnin' sojers into navvies is bad enough in the open; but to go a-tearin' up gentlemen's gardens—pooh! it's sheer madness. If Mr Crawford 'ad a been in my old corps 'e'd a got the tip to send in 'is papers, a 'oldin' o' us up to ridicule.'

'Be quiet, Rock,' said Oliver.

'Cert'inly, sir; but we ain't ever a-goin' to beat them 'Uns by diggin' 'oles in the earth; that's my view. This muckin' about trenchin' an' sappin' 'll only drag out the war. Look what it done at Sebastopol. Kept the army 'angin' about through a whole winter, an' got 'em starved to death, instead o' marchin' straight in an' chuckin' the Rooshians out. Mark me, that's what'll happen in France. Such rot!'

'You'd better tell the Commander-in-Chief so.'

'An' 'e might do worse than take an old sojer's advice. Bobs 'as arst my opinion more 'n once. I reckon I 'ad as much to do with the success o' the march from Cabul to Candy'ar as any one.'

'Indeed! How was that?' asked Oliver.

'Why, I remember one night we was dead-beat. There was ours an' the Rifles an' the Third Gurks, little black ugly demons they was, but good fighters. We was five mile short o' the day's march, an' all done-up. I was sentry on Bobs's tent, an' I was leanin' on my rifle, when the General comes up an' nods to me in a friendly way. I sees he looks very down, so I arsts 'im what's the matter. "Can't get the men along fast enough, Rock," he says. "At this rate we'll never get to Candy'ar in time."

"I can tell you 'ow to get another five mile a day out o' 'em, Sir Frederick," I says.

"'Ow, Rock-'ow?" 'e answers.

"Give 'em more rum," I says.

"It's a 'orrible idea, Rock," says 'e. "I can't a-bear the thought o' a' army what drinks."

"Well," says I solemnly, "then we shall be too

late. It's the only chance."

'The General walks up an' down a bit, with his 'ands behind 'im; then 'e says suddenly, "I'll think of it, Rock—I'll think of it." An' sure enough next day, when the men shows signs that they can't march no farther, Bobs 'alts the column, an' serves out a good tot o' rum all round, an' we does another seven mile. An' so it was, when we got tired, out

came the rum, an' that's what got us to Candy'ar. If we'd ha' 'ad more rum we'd ha' done it in less time; which reminds me as talkin' is dry work, an''—

'Get out, you old scoundrel!' cried Vivian; 'and if ever I see you the worse for drink I'll put you under arrest that very minute.'

'The worse for drink, after twenty-three years in the Fightin' Fifth! I don't think that's very likely to 'appen.' And Rock solemnly departed.

# CHAPTER X.

#### THE ROUTE ARRIVES.

OF course, Crawford got severely chaffed about his exploit, Skinner being one of the loudest in his remarks. Harris and Crawford afterwards read the matter up in the latest military textbooks, and convinced themselves that Crawford was perfectly right.

A night or two later Colonel Blunt dined with the officers of the Wessex, and after the loyal toasts proposed the health of Crawford, saying that any one who had the pluck to stand up to the Admiral when he was really cross had certainly nothing to fear from the Germans.

Then came an invitation from the Admiral for the officers and sergeants of the Wessex to spend a day at Tintagel, where sports and a big feed were to be arranged. The Colonel and the Adjutant, strict soldiers whose only thoughts were to get the regiment fit for service, were much against the idea. 'A whole day wasted!' said the Colonel. 'We can't afford it.'

But the juniors to a man were much in favour of going; and, as the chief did not want to appear grumpy, he said he would think it over. Eventually he gave a rather grudging consent.

Skinner was particularly delighted. 'Jolly decent, I call it,' he said to Oliver; 'though I think the chief ought to have accepted at once. We sha'n't get

much chance of a day's spree when we're across the water, I expect, and we ought to make the most of our chances here. Goodness knows how many of us will ever come back, and so I say take all the enjoyment you can now. I mean to have a jolly good day!'

'You might be orderly officer the day we go,'

suggested Oliver.

'I say, old man, chuck it! I never knew such a fellow as you for making unpleasant suggestions.'

'Well,' grinned Oliver, 'I'm only throwing out a

possibility; you know there's many a slip, &c.'

'The "General" would take my duty in a minute,' said Skinner; 'he's a glutton for work.'

'He'll find the benefit when we get into the trenches.'

'Well, he's welcome,' said Skinner, lighting a cigarette. 'I've made up my mind to have a jolly spree;' and he walked off.

There was a great deal of such talk amongst the subalterns, for they had had nothing but hard work

for a good many weeks.

It was on Wednesday, the outing having been fixed for Friday, when the Colonel, his face all smiles, said at mess that he had a piece of good news to impart. Faces brightened, and some thoughts turned to the anticipated day at Tintagel; but the Colonel said, 'Gentlemen, I have just received a very gratifying letter from the War Office. Our inspection last Monday was so satisfactory that it has been decided to send us to the front at once. To-morrow I forward to the War Office the names of all those who are fit for service, and on Saturday morning we start.'

A spontaneous cheer, that made the men wonder what on earth had aroused the officers' enthusiasm, broke out; and when it had died down Oliver whispered to Skinner, 'Your day at the Admiral's will be spoilt after all, old man.'

'Hang the Admiral!' replied Skinner valiantly. 'We shall be thinking of other things then, I'll bet.'

From that moment all was excitement, getting service kit together, procuring the things necessary for the campaign, giving away or sending home useless things, and writing farewell letters to friends. No leave was to be granted, which many thought very hard; but really it was a kindness, for that saying good-bye to loved ones left behind is the hardest thing in the soldier's life. A good many came down to camp, but the farewells there had to be cut short. The young soldiers under nineteen were to be left at home to form the nucleus of a home battalion; and a good few others failed to pass the doctor. The elderly ones also were to be left behind, only the really fit being taken.

Vivian and Oliver were sitting in their tent on the Friday morning, writing a few farewell notes, when Cheery Dick, their servant, burst in unceremoniously. 'I say, gentlemen,' he began, 'there's goin' to be trouble in this 'ere battalion. I want to see the Colonel at once. Will one o' you please go with

me?'

'Now then, you old rascal, what do you mean by bursting in like that? What's the matter?'

'Mutiny's the matter, sir; rank mutiny!'

'What do you mean?'

'Why, the bloomin' sergeant-major, dash 'is impidence! 'as just told me I ain't a-goin' out with O.H. E

the reg'ment. "Too old," 'e says, an' me with twenty-three to my credit in the Fightin' Fifth. What's the reg'ment goin' to do without me? I arsts.'

'Not going out!' said Oliver with some regret, for

he had taken a fancy to the eccentric old soldier.

'So that fat-'ead said, beggin' your pardon. But I want to see the Colonel. I'll fight it out with 'im.'

'I'll speak to him about it,' said Oliver soothingly.

'You are a bit old, though, you know.'

'Thirty-eight,' said Rock unblushingly; 'my attes-

tation paper shows that.'

'H'm! sometimes figures are put down incorrectly,' Vivian said, alluding to Crawford's celebrated trench-

digging.

'Well, sir, by the rules o' the service you know it's my right to see my commandin' officer if I feel myself aggrieved, an' 'ere I do; an' as my company officer I make a request that you'll take me to 'im.'

'If you persist I will; but I tell you now that if the Colonel has decided that you are to stay at home,

stay you must.'

'I'll 'ear 'im say so with my own ears,' said Rock.

Some ten minutes later Vivian and Oliver accompanied him into the orderly-room, where the Colonel and the Adjutant were busy. Vivian, according to regulations, said Private Rock felt himself aggrieved, and wished to make a complaint.

'Well, my man,' said Colonel Hastings, 'what's the matter? Put it in few words, as I have no time to

spare.'

'It's about this 'ere news that I'm to stop behind, Colonel,' said Cheery Dick.

'H'm—ha! yes,' said the Colonel. 'You're over age unfortunately. I'm sorry, but it can't be helped.'

'I'm thirty-eight, Colonel.'

- 'Nonsense, Rock! How many years did you serve in the army?'
  - 'Twenty-three, sir.'
- 'And you took your discharge ten years ago; that's thirty-three, you know.'
- 'I was born in the old Fifth, Colonel, an' I joined the drums almost as soon as I could toddle.'
  - 'That won't do, Rock.'
- 'Well, anyway, I'm attested here as thirty-eight, sir.'
  - 'You know the penalty for false attestation.'
- 'Look 'ere, Colonel, sir,' said Rock pleadingly; 'look 'ere at these,' and he pointed to his medal-ribbons. 'I arst you, sir, whether you don't think I've earned the right to fight for my country. Good Gawd, 'as it come to this, that Dick Rock ain't no more good? What does it matter whether I'm thirty-eight or fifty-eight in years? In 'eart I'm a boy, an' I'll march or shoot agen any man in the reg'ment, that I swear.'
  - 'But the regulations, Rock?'
- 'Regulations is broken every day, sir. Good Lord, do you think, with twenty-three years in the finest reg'ment that ever saluted the colours, sir, I joined this crowd, an' put up with the snobbishness o' a lot o' upstart non-coms., an' learned a lot o' rotten new drill—a standin' at ease with my arms behind my back like a whipped schoolboy, a dressin' in line by shufflin' backwards an' forwards as if I 'ad 'ot cinders in my boots, a fixin' baynits with my left 'and like a wooden-'eaded sepoy—to stop at 'ome 'ere an' amuse servant-gals? No, sir; my country wants me, an' if you don't take me I 'll—

  But no, sir, I knows my

duty, an' I ain't goin' to forget myself by sayin' what I didn't oughter.'

The Colonel turned, whispered to the Adjutant, and then said, 'I'm sorry, Rock, but my hands are tied. I appreciate your feelings as an old soldier, and I'll use my influence with the War Office to get you sent out with the first draft.' And he shook Rock by the hand.

'Thank ye, Colonel,' said Rock, and, seeing he was dismissed, he saluted, turned about, and gave Oliver a

prodigious wink as he passed him.

'The regulation is a stupid one, I admit,' said the Colonel when Rock had gone. 'Such a man in a tight corner is invaluable; but I'm afraid I can do nothing.'

'We might make a special application for him, sir,'

said the Adjutant. 'He is a useful man.'

'Very well, we will.—Now, boys,' to Oliver and Vivian, 'be off, and see that your servant doesn't get paying too many visits to the canteen before we go.'

'If Master Rock makes up his mind to celebrate the occasion,' said Vivian, as they went towards their tent, 'I don't think we shall be able to stop him.'

'I'm afraid not,' admitted Oliver. 'I believe he's got some scheme in his wily old brain, though. He winked broadly at me when the Colonel had done speaking to him.'

'He's really past a joke. If we weren't going on

service we should have to pull him up a bit.'

'Well, we shall probably lose sight of him for a few weeks anyhow, though I expect he'll make himself a nuisance to those left behind.'

The Colonel went off that day to the port of

embarkation to see that all was ready for the regiment when it arrived. The men were to march from camp at six-thirty next morning, without any fuss or noise, entrain at the station, and get away as quietly as possible, according to instructions received from London.

'Steal off, if you may say so, like a lot o' convicts,' said Rock to one or two cronies that night. 'Time was when sojers goin' on active service was played to the station by bands an' cheered on the way. I suppose the bloomin' 'Uns livin' in England wouldn't like it if we was to give the men a 'earty send off nowadays; mustn't 'urt their feelins, oh dear no, poor things! Bah-makes me sick!'

Soon after five next morning Cheery Dick aroused his two masters. 'Now then, gents, time to turn out,' he said. 'It's an 'orrible mornin', drizzlin' with rain an' very depressin', an' the men 'll most likely be a bit out o' 'and. You've got a rough day before you, a long ride in a stuffy train, fuss o' gettin' embarked, more'n likely seasick crossin', an' no end o' muckin' about the other side. I know what it is; I've been through it all a good many times.'

'Go away, you dismal brute,' cried Vivian, 'and

get our tub ready sharp.'

'Why, you ain't a-goin' to bath the day you march out, surely?' said Rock.

'We are.'

'Waste o' time I calls it. You'll be black enough by to-morrow.'

'Anyway, we shall have seen the back of you.'

'There's ongratefulness!' said Rock sadly, as he went off; but the grin on his face belied his words.

In due course the men breakfasted, the regiment

paraded and marched off. It had been given out that there was to be no demonstration by the other troops in camp, and everything was quiet till, outside the camp, in the road which led to the station, the martial strains of a military band suddenly broke out. 'The Girl I left behind Me,' the old-time marching-out tune, fell on the men's ears, and, delighted, they took up the air and sang with all their might.

Oliver and Vivian, marching with the leading

company, looked askance at one another.

'Funny!' said Vivian. 'I thought we were to go quietly to the station.'

'It's jolly, though, marching to a band. Who are they? Can you see?'

'They're in khaki; that's all I can see.'

Meanwhile the band roused the echoes, and from 'The Girl I left behind Me' went on to 'Annie Laurie.' The Adjutant came cantering up to the head of the column, and, reining in beside Vivian, said, 'I can't make this out, Mr Drummond. The Colonel told me we were to move off quietly.'

'So I understood, sir.'

'It's the band of the Somersets from the camp. Just go along and ask the bandmaster how it is they're playing us out.'

Vivian ran forward, and presently returned, saying Colonel Hastings had sent the bandmaster word on the previous day to meet the regiment outside the

camp, and play them to the station.

'Strange he didn't mention it to me,' said the Adjutant; and on they marched. The drums and fifes relieved the brass band, and the men swung along to the tune of 'The British Grenadiers.' The people turned out in the villages they passed through, and

cheered lustily, many falling in beside the soldiers and accompanying them to the station. As the men were entrained the band formed on the platform and played a selection of national airs, which the onlookers sang. Oliver, who was close to the band, thanked the bandmaster for his services, and said it would cheer the men up, adding that it was a most pleasant surprise.

'So it was to me, sir,' said the bandmaster. 'Your Colonel's servant said it was to be a surprise to you, and he particularly specified the tunes we were to

play.'

'Quite the right old sort.'

'Just'so; nothing like the old tunes to rouse up the boys. By the way, that servant of your Colonel is a fine old soldier. Seen some service.'

'Has he? Why, I didn't know he'd seen any.'

'Well, the man who came over to me last night had a double row of medal-ribbons, Lord Roberts's star amongst them. He's an old Regular.'

'Roberts's star!' said Oliver, a light dawning upon him. 'Was he a middle-aged man, with a very stiff

bearing and a sort of wooden countenance?'

'That's him; a regular old barrack-room Tommy; scattered his "h's" in an extraordinary fashion.'

'Good heavens!' thought Oliver, 'this is that old villain Rock's doing. It's lucky for him the pater is not here.' He did not think it wise to say anything to the bandmaster, however, and, the men having entrained, he shook hands and entered his carriage, the band striking up 'Auld Lang Syne,' and the onlookers cheering lustily as the train drew out of the station.

Oliver told Vivian of his suspicions, and the latter

was quite of opinion that the band was entirely Rock's arrangement.

'That was his farewell shot,' said Vivian. 'We'd better not mention our suspicions to any one else; but, thank goodness! we've seen the last of him. He'll never have the effrontery to face the chief after this;' and they seated themselves comfortably for the journey.

# CHAPTER XI.

## CHEERY DICK GETS THINGS READY.

RAMP! tramp! Scrunch! scrunch! A regiment of khaki-clad men are plodding along a country road 'somewhere in France.' Clouds of dust are churned up by the hundreds of pairs of feet; the men, marching at ease, have their caps on the back of their heads, tunics are unbuttoned, rifles are carried butt upwards or slung on the shoulder, while the bronzed faces wear that strained look caused by pushing the power of endurance to the last limit.

It is a sultry day, and the Wessex Fusiliers have had a twenty-mile march, 'all on,' as Tommy calls

heavy marching order.

A month has elapsed since that day when they swung out of camp in England to the tune of 'The Girl I left behind Me.' The Channel was crossed without accident, and three weeks at Rouen followed. Then by road and rail they have been passed forward until at last they are only a few miles behind the firing-line, that bulwark that holds the Hun at bay.

All around them are the grim realities that show Europe is at war. Ruined cottages, battered churches, deserted farms, neglected orchards, an occasional broken-down transport wagon, or the festering remains of a horse, are among the sights; the sullen booming of the British heavy guns among the sounds.

Crawford, anxious to know what war really looks like, stares about him with interest as he plugs steadily forward; Oliver and Vivian, equally tired, recognise the to them familiar sights, and realise that at last they are back at the front. The dust is choking, and the men look regretfully at their long-empty water-bottles, feeling they would give a week's pay for a pint of clear cold water.

Some of the plucky ones whistle as they march, and one Tommy performs manfully on a mouth-organ. Every man is there 'to do his bit,' and not a sullen face could be found in all that long array. All are perfectly cheerful, though it is realised that the job they are out for is no picnic. The old anxious look of the men in the first stages of the war is gone. The might of Germany has been realised; she can spring no more surprises on the Allies; she is known as a formidable and relentless enemy, a treacherous and cruel foe. The Teuton snake has been scotched, but yet remains to be killed, and many a gallant lad must bite the dust before that can be accomplished. The facts are realised, looked resolutely in the face, and tackled with calm and cheerful determination. That is the spirit of the new army.

'Seems as if we'd never left these surroundings, now we're back again,' said Oliver to Vivian, as they passed some battered, roofless houses.

'Yes, they're grim reminders, certainly,' answered Vivian. 'But the men seem to take it all coolly enough, though to them they must come with something of a shock.'

While they were talking an orderly came trotting down the road towards them, and delivered a note to the Colonel. Reading it, he turned to the regiment. 'Another half-mile, boys, and we reach our billets. Pull yourselves together, and show the old soldiers that Territorials can march with the best.'

Tunics were buttoned, rifles sloped, and in less than a quarter of an hour the regiment marched into a partly ruined town which was for the present to be its headquarters.

The men were billeted in several large barns and the remains of a church, the officers being accommodated in some of the least damaged houses.

A sergeant of the Army Service Corps approached a group of subalterns, and asked whether Lieutenant Drummond was amongst them.

'Yes; I am he,' replied Vivian.

'Oh, that house right over there, the last one before you get to the ploughed field, is your billet,

sir. Your man has got supper ready.'

'My man?' queried Vivian. 'I haven't got one. I've been sharing a servant with several others, and the lad has only just marched in with us. He's certainly had no time to get supper, and I expect he wants a feed as badly as we do.'

'Well, that's what the man said,' added the sergeant; 'and, in any case, that is your billet, sir.'

The regimental transport having got in an hour or so before the regiment, rations were issued at once; and the men, stripping off their packs, set about cooking them immediately.

'We may as well be getting over to our show, Vivian,' said Oliver; 'a wash would do me good.'

'And so say all of us,' cried Harris. And with Crawford and Skinner they made for their billet.

They noticed that the house, though part of the roof had been blown off, was one of the best left

standing, and when they trooped in there was an air of comfort about the place. They threw their haver-sacks, coats, and belts into one corner, and then went off in search of the means of washing.

'Out at the back is the usual place in this kind of house,' said Oliver; and they went down the narrow

passage.

A most appetising smell of cooking tickled their noses, and Skinner said, 'By Jove! that smell cheers me up. I'm so ravenous, I could eat a pound of the dad's celebrated sausages.'

'There's certainly some one cooking here,' said

Vivian. 'Listen; he's singing.'

All paused for a moment, and a hoarse voice was heard singing, or rather croaking, the following words:

'Bu'st the bugle, blow the drum,
Show us the way the enemy come;
Right—left, left—right,
Oh, it wouldn't be right to be left to fight.
Bu'st the bugle, blow the drum,
I'm sick of the sound of its tan-ta-rum;
While the bang of a musket in my ear
Is too much for the runaway Fusilier.'

'I seem to recognise that voice,' said Vivian.

'Surely it can't be that old rascal Rock?' queried Oliver.

'Hallo, who's takin' my name in vain?' answered the singer; and next moment Cheery Dick, spick and span, a large towel round his waist for an apron, stepped from the kitchen. 'Good-evenin', gents,' he said. 'You've come at last; but everything is spoilt by bein' kept waitin'. Good witals burnt an' good drink evaporated. If you'd ha' been in the Fightin'

Fifth you'd ha' stepped it out a bit more smarter, believe me. But there, there ain't no sojers now, only flannel-chested mollycoddles.'

'How the dickens did you get here?' asked Vivian

sternly.

'I got across in a boat, trained it to a place with a name no Christian could pronounce, and got up here in a transport wagon, all accordin' to reg'lashuns. And now if you wants a wash, come this way.'

Oliver gave Vivian a warning look, and he said no more just then, as it was perhaps just as well for

Rock not to say too much before so many.

As the five went out to the great tub in the garden, Rock said, 'Surely all these gentlemen ain't in mess 'ere, are they?'

'Every one,' replied Oliver.

'What! all a piggin' in together? Well, it wouldn't ha' done for the old Fightin' Fifth. Orficers was gentlemen then; but I suppose that's altered now, like everything else.'

'Now, you run off, Rock,' said Vivian, 'and get on

the table whatever there is for supper.'

Presently the subs. were seated round the table in what Rock called the mess-room, and he proceeded to bring in the food, grumbling as he placed every dish on the table. First came some soup. 'Would ha' bin plenty for three,' grumbled Cheery Dick; 'but when it comes to five—well, I 'ad to water it down, that's all;' and he banged it on the table.

Whether he had watered it or not, it was very excellent soup; and the roasted rabbit, which he said might have been an old tom-cat for all he knew, and the couple of chickens were done to a turn, though

Rock declared they were spoilt. He had vegetables and bread, and two bottles of good claret.

'You must make the most of 'em,' said Rock. 'I provided for two, an' if you plumps three more on me some one's got to go short.'

'Well, I'm a teetotaler, Rock, so there are only four,' said Crawford.

'A tee- What, sir?' asked the old soldier.

'Teetotaler! Water-drinker, if you like.'

'Good Lord,' groaned Rock; 'an' 'im a' orficer!'

Lastly, Rock placed cigars on the table, at which Vivian said, 'I say, where on earth did you raise all these things?'

'Oh, over there;' and Rock nodded his head, and jerked his thumb back over his left shoulder.

'But where's that?' persisted Vivian.

'Over at the staminy.'

'The what?'

'The pub, sir.'

'Oh, the estaminet! I see. But these things must have cost a lot of money. You can't get them given to you.'

'Oh, don't bother about that! I paid for 'em, an'

you'll pay again; never fear.'

'Of all the surly old dogs!' laughed Skinner. 'Upon my word, I don't know how you fellows put up with him.'

'He's got us a jolly good feed, anyway,' said

Oliver.

'To which we've done ample justice,' added Crawford; 'and as a soldier who's seen much service, Rock has my respect.'

After the fatigue of the day all were tired, and they were thinking of turning in, when an orderly came and said the Adjutant wanted to see Mr Hastings and Mr Drummond. It was only on some regimental matter, and in an hour they were back again. Their comrades had, however, turned in.

Rock, hearing Oliver and Vivian return, came into the room and said their sleeping-place was above, and that he had made all things snug.

'Ah! that reminds me you haven't told us yet how it is that we find you here,' said Oliver.

'I told you; I followed on.'

'But how did you manage it? Does the Colonel

know you're here?'

'No, sir; you'll tell 'im in the mornin'. By the way, sir, I ain't a-goin' to be servant to the whole orficers' mess. You an' Mr Drummond is all right; even Mr Crawford ain't so bad; but Mr Skinner, what the men call "Sausage," an' Mr Harris, what's always a-readin' an' fiddlin'—well, they ain't the sort o' people I like. I don't mind sojers, an' I like gentlemen, an' on such I'll wait; but I ain't no bloomin' mess waiter.'

'Now, look here, Rock,' said Vivian; 'you're a great deal too free in your speech, and you've got to alter it, or we shall disagree. Tell me at once how you got here, or I'll hand you over to the guard.'

'I ain't committed no crime.'

'What about turning out the Somersets' band to play us off from camp against the Colonel's orders?'

Rock gave an almost perceptible whistle, but, instantly resuming his wooden appearance, pretended he did not know what Vivian meant.

'It's no good. Mr Hastings had it from the band-

master himself. If I tell the Colonel he'll put you under arrest.'

'But you won't, sir.'

'Oh! and why not?'

- ''Cos you're a gentleman, sir, an' gentlemen don't do such things.'
  - 'You admit the offence, then?'

'Not at all, sir.'

'All right. I'll see if the Colonel can get the truth out of you.'

"Old on, sir; no need to tell im."

'How did you manage to get over here, then?'

'The captain left in command of the depot couldn't agree with me; and when I asked to be sent over 'ere, 'e jumped at the chance.'

'Oh, I see; you made yourself such a nuisance that

he was glad to get rid of you-eh?'

"E didn't say so. E just got me attached to an A.S.C. unit which was comin' over, an' I got sent on 'ere, where I 'eard the reg'ment was comin', and that's all.'

'Well, I'll report the matter to the Colonel in the morning. And now we're off to bed.'

He and Oliver ascended the rather rickety stairs, and found a couple of quite decent mattresses on the floor, with three army blankets on each.

Rock came up with them. 'I've made the other gents comfortable,' he said. 'After all, they ain't so bad; an' as we sha'n't be 'ere long, an' they 're chums o' you two like, I'll just look after 'em.'

'That's better.'

'Good-night, gentlemen.'

'Good-night.'

'Oh, and p'r'aps if the Colonel don't know nothing



'How the dickens did you get here?' asked Vivian sternly.

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about that band business, it might be as well not to mention it.'

'I'll see,' said Vivian.

'And, of course, as to gettin' out 'ere, why, the Colonel hisself said as I should come with the first draft, an' so that's all right.'

## CHAPTER XII.

### THE WESSEX ARE LET DOWN LIGHTLY.

TIME did not hang on the hands of the Wessex Fusiliers. The very next day they were inspected by the Brigadier, who, after warmly welcoming them, expressed himself delighted with their soldier-like appearance, and said that if they only came up to the other Territorial battalions under his command he should be perfectly satisfied. Not a man in the Wessex but vowed he would do his best to knock the record of every other battalion sick. They were to be employed the very next day; and the Brigadier said that as they were new troops he would 'let them down lightly' at first.

Soon after dawn next day two companies, armed with picks and spades, were marched off. Oliver, Vivian, and Crawford were amongst the subalterns, a captain being in command. They marched about a mile towards the front to a spot where the Engineers were busy digging shelter-trenches and preparing an emplacement for a heavy battery.

The Wessex were shown what they had to do, and soon, in shirt-sleeves, they were wielding pick and shovel with a will. The men were working on a front of several hundred yards, and, the morning being fine, were smoking, whistling, and laughing, as merry as possible.

Crawford's platoon was next to Oliver's, and the officers were standing talking, when suddenly, above

the sullen boom of distant firing, a roaring, whistling sound was heard.

'A shell, by Jove!' said Oliver; and Crawford, all excitement, looked up in the air as though expecting to see it. He did not, but he heard a terrific report, and saw a great cloud of black smoke burst out some distance in the rear.

The noise startled every one, and all left off work. One or two of the officers, Crawford among them, walked over and looked at the great yawning hole torn by the shell; but Oliver and Vivian stayed with the men.

'That's simply the enemy saying, "Good-morning, boys," said Vivian in a minute or so. 'Take no notice; but, if a shell drops near you, throw yourselves flat on the ground, and do not move until after the explosion.'

There were a few pale faces amongst the men, and one or two did not resume work for a minute or two. The others, however, started at once, and laugh and joke were soon being bandied about.

To reassure the men, Oliver and Vivian had taken pick and shovel in hand, as had Crawford, when again that screaming roar sounded, and a second shell fell a little to their left. A sort of gasp of anxiety went along the rows of diggers, and again came the terrific roar of the explosion. No one was injured, and the men kept on working. Then at intervals of about ten minutes the huge shells kept dropping; but by good luck no one was hit, and the men began joking about it.

'Look out, Tom!' a man would cry. 'Another express train coming; all change for the Bank.'

Vivian's practised eye, however, could see that the

German gunners were gradually getting the range, and he and Oliver made the men lie down on the first sound of the shell coming. Presently there was a hoarse shout as a shell fell; and, looking round after the explosion, the friends saw that the projectile had fallen right amongst a working party, and that several huddled-up forms lay upon the ground, some still, one or two jerking spasmodically.

The Wessex had suffered their first casualty!

Oliver and Vivian ran to the spot.

'Pass the word for the stretcher-party,' said Vivian, and he turned to look at the wounded. Alas! an old sergeant—his identity was established by his braces, for his head was blown completely off—and a lad barely nineteen were dead; two others were dangerously wounded, and three less severely.

The stretchers were soon up, and the ghastly burdens lifted on to them. One of the less seriously wounded was a lad named Rogers, of Vivian's platoon. A shell-splinter had smashed several fingers of his left hand and lacerated the muscles of his right leg—extremely painful wounds, though not dangerous. He lay patiently awaiting the stretcher, and Oliver stood by him.

'This is not fair, Rogers,' he said gaily. 'You'll be home again for a few weeks' holiday, while your chums are out here. Your time for leave hasn't arrived yet.'

'I don't want to go home, sir; I'd sooner be here with the boys,' replied the plucky lad. 'I shall get laughed at for being home wounded before I've fired a shot or seen a German.'

'Never mind. You'll have better luck next time.'

'I hope so, sir.'

He winced a bit as he was lifted on to the stretcher,

but he bit his lip; and, on being settled, cried out to a chum to give him a cigarette and light it. And then the procession started, some turning their heads away as the two dead men passed them; but the wounded were cheerful enough, Rogers waving his un-wounded hand and saying he would give his chums' kind regards to the girls they had left behind them. Hardly had the wounded gone when two shells

came over in quick succession; and, though no one was hurt, they fell uncomfortably close. The men were a little unnerved, and Oliver and Vivian wished fiercely that they might only get a chance of having a shot back, for they knew that to work passively under fire, and to suffer losses without the joyous excitement of hitting back, is the soldier's most trying experience.

'We must keep their spirits up,' said Vivian, as he handed Oliver a cigarette, and they both lit up. 'Let's walk round amongst them.'

Crawford came up. 'I say, you fellows, what's the correct thing to do?' he asked. 'I never considered this passive endurance sort of business.'

'Have a cigarette, Crawford. Let your men see that you have no fear, establish their confidence, and carry on.'

Crawford lit the cigarette given him and walked away, though he looked a little pale.

And for nearly an hour longer the Wessex worked under fire, unable to retaliate in the slightest, while shells burst all round them, and occasionally in their midst. When what might be called the novelty of the danger had worn off, the men worked doggedly on, and though they suffered eleven more casualties not a man flinched. Then came an order for them to retire.

One of the Brigadier's staff, who had brought the order, dismounted and marched beside Oliver. 'I can't make out how the dickens the enemy got news of our whereabouts,' he said. 'There have been no aeroplanes over this morning, and we're quite invisible from the German position.'

'Spies, I expect,' said Oliver. 'It was always the case in the early part of the war, and I expect it is

now.'

'That's what the General thinks; but we've not been able to discover any. I hear your men behaved like old soldiers.'

'They did; and if this is what the General calls "letting them down lightly," I wonder what he calls giving it to them hot.'

The officer smiled as he mounted his horse and

trotted off.

The men were marched back to their quarters, and the Colonel complimented them for their steadiness under fire. 'The Boches have drawn first blood,' he said, 'but if I'm spared I promise you we'll get even with them before very long.'

'Good heavens, Hastings!' said Crawford to him as they walked towards their quarters, 'I believe I'm

a coward.

'Nonsense, man! You looked as cool as a cucumber, smoking a cigarette, walking about chatting cheerily to your platoon.'

'Looked—yes; but the fact is I was literally in a blue funk; though, for the Lord's sake, don't tell any

one else.'

Oliver burst out laughing. 'And do you think I wasn't?' he asked.

'No; were you really, though?'

'I give you my word I was; and so, I'll bet, was Vivian.

'But you two looked so cool and brave.'

'My dear boy, in a month you'll do the same. Familiarity breeds contempt. You'll get so used to being under fire that, though at first you'll feel nervous, you'll conquer it and take no notice.'

'You've put new life into me; for if I thought I

was going to show the white feather I'd shoot myself

off-hand.

That night they returned to their work; and, though there had been no firing all day, they hadn't been working an hour before the shells came dropping over.

'It's pretty clear to me there are spies in the place, and they give the news to the Germans; though how I can't imagine.'

There were no casualties during the night; and,

very tired, they returned to their quarters.

Next day the other half of the regiment took over the duty, and that night an important gun position was finished. The heavy guns were already in the town, and during the night were taken up by the artillery and placed in position. They were all carefully covered with branches of trees and tarpaulin, so that an aeroplane could not discover them, for it was intended to open on the Germans from that spot as a sort of surprise. Various fatigue-parties toiled taking up a supply of ammunition; and a detachment of the Wessex, with which were Oliver and Vivian, were busy finishing shell-proof shelters for the gunners.

The day dawned and the sun rose, the work being almost finished. There was nothing to make any one at a distance suspect the presence of the battery, and

the men had nearly all taken shelter in the trenches, when an aeroplane was heard buzzing and humming overhead. At once half-a-dozen pairs of glasses were turned upon it, but any one could see with the naked eye it was a German Taube machine, on account of its wing-shaped planes and its tail. When first seen it was at a great height, but it dropped and circled round and round, like some monstrous bird looking for a place to alight.

'Upon my word, you'd think they were trying to find out where the battery is,' said Oliver to Vivian. 'It seems as if they knew it was somewhere about here, and could not locate it.'

'It's more than probable that is exactly the case,' replied Vivian.

'But how can they know? It's impossible for their spies to pass our trenches.'

'Perhaps we shall find out later on.'

No one moved or betrayed his presence in any way, and presently the aeroplane flew back to the German lines.

The new battery had been placed on some slightly rising ground, just at the edge of a wood. Behind it were several fields which had once been under cultivation; to the right was arable land, several cottages being visible about a mile away. To the left a lane led back to the village in which were the troops. Vivian was looking out across the arable land, where he noticed an old man with a plough, to which was harnessed a miserable-looking horse. The man was just the ordinary peasant of the country; but, instead of a hat, his head was tied up in a black silk handkerchief. Vivian did not take much notice of the man, though, for the horse claimed most of his attention.

Although it was in poor condition, it was a very big horse, a rusty gray in colour, and standing over sixteen hands high. It had a peculiar shambling gait, and jerked its head about as it walked.

gait, and jerked its head about as it walked.

Vivian was just calling Oliver's attention to these points when the rumbling buzz of a propeller was heard, and again the German aeroplane flew overhead.

All eyes were naturally turned upwards, in expectation of a bomb being dropped, when Vivian, remembering the ploughman, turned to see what he was doing to obtain shelter did the aeroplane drop any bombs. The old man, however, was taking not the slightest notice, but, having dropped the coulter in the earth, was ploughing a furrow almost at right angles to the previous ones, and directly towards the centre of the battery. He kept straight on till within fifty yards, then turned round and went back. Soon after the aeroplane disappeared again, and the old man, having got back to his original furrow, stuck his ploughshare in the ground, unharnessed his horse, and went off as though to breakfast.

The coast being clear, the men came from their shelters and resumed work. About half-an-hour later, without any warning, the rush of a shell was heard, and a ten-inch dropped within a hundred yards of the battery. Another and another followed, and the range was so good that several of the guns were hit. The men took shelter in the trenches; but some casualties occurred, while the battery was pretty well knocked to pieces. The men were hot in their wrath at seeing all their work destroyed, and the artillerymen were especially furious to behold their beloved guns damaged.

'It's a dashed funny thing,' said an artillery subaltern to Oliver, 'but the Boches seem to find out everything. It's clear they've spotted this battery, though how on earth they did so passes my comprehension.'

'Second sight,' said Vivian dryly.

'Bosh!' replied the gunner angrily. 'You may as well tell me they can mesmerise us.'

'You mistake my meaning. I mean they must have some one this side who uses his eyes for them.'

'Oh, I take you—spies! That's very likely. We're surrounded by them; but it's impossible to get the information over to the Boches; there wouldn't be time.'

'There may be.'

'How?'

'That I am going to try to find out. You're convinced that the Germans have got wind of this battery, and have not discovered it with their aeroplane.'

'Perfectly.'

'I think you are right, too. But here comes a staff officer with news. Shall we open fire, or shall we retire, I wonder?'

'We shall know in a few minutes;' and so they did. The order was for all the men to retire except the artillerymen. They were not to fire, but to keep under shelter and await further orders.

'And shift our guns again for the Boches to smash up,' growled the gunner. 'But we'll give them sox yet. Wait till we open on them.'

## CHAPTER XIII.

## A TURN AT DETECTIVE WORK.

AND you think that the enemy is getting his information from spies, Colonel Hastings?'

'I most certainly do, General; but, as I said before, I am basing my opinion more on what Mr Drummond and my son have told me than on my own personal observations. I think I have already mentioned that they were out here from the beginning of the war till Neuve Chapelle, that Mr Drummond was in the Secret Service before the war, and that both of them have had considerable experience of German methods.'

'Well, I should like to see these two officers, and hear their opinions myself;' and very shortly afterwards Oliver and Vivian were closeted with Colonel Hastings and the General in command.

The result of the interview was that the two young officers were relieved from regimental duty for a few days, and entrusted with the task of unearthing the spies, or in some other way of finding out how the enemy got news of the movements of the British in that sector.

'This is a job after my own heart,' said Vivian, as they were on their way back to their quarters; 'a free hand, and no one but ourselves to bother about.'

'It will put me in mind of our trip down-country from Mainz to Liège,' said Oliver. 'That was an exciting time, anyway.' 'More exciting than healthy,' chimed in Colonel Hastings, who had left the General's quarters with them. 'Remember, you are not to take any unnecessary risks. The General would be very cross if anything happened to you, and I rely largely on your help to steady the boys when we get into our first stand-up scrap.'

'We'll be careful, dad,' said Oliver. 'Don't worry; there'll be no danger. It will be more a war of wits

than of weapons.'

On returning to their quarters they sat down to discuss the best way of setting about the business.

'I must say I strongly suspect that old peasant fellow who ploughed straight towards the battery,' remarked Vivian. 'It was very strange that directly he, as it were, located our position, the aeroplane sheered off, and in a few minutes the Boches were sending their compliments from their heavy artillery.'

'It's quite possible you're right, Vivian; but we shall have to act circumspectly, for it would not do to make a mistake and hurt the feelings of our Allies.'

'Trust me; my Secret Service work taught me the way to go about this sort of inquiry. And that reminds me that it won't do for us to go butting in on this business in British uniform. Some sort of disguise will be necessary.'

'There's also the language difficulty. Neither you

nor I speak Flemish or Walloon.'

'True; but with our knowledge of French and German we should be able to make a pretty good guess at what we hear. And this will be more a case of using our eyes than our tongues.'

They were still discussing the best way of setting about the business when Skinner came in. 'Hallo, you fellows! plotting mischief—eh?' he asked in his irresponsible fashion.

'Yes,' replied Oliver; 'we're considering the possibility of putting the natives here through a

course of Swedish drill, with you as instructor.'

'Brute!' cried Skinner. 'If you ever mention Swedish drill to me again, I'll write the pater to send you a hundredweight of his infamous sausages, and make you live on them until they're all gone.'

'Jolly good idea! I like them, and I'm sure I could do a roaring trade among the natives with

those I could not eat myself.'

'Talking of natives, they're an inquisitive crowd,' said Skinner.

'In what way?'

'Why, you know, Harris and I have been on transport work for the last two days. On several occasions we've met natives who have asked a hundred and one questions about the troops.'

'What sort of questions?' asked Vivian, at once on

the alert.

'Oh, what regiment we belonged to, how strong we were, what part of England we came from, how long we'd been in training, when we were going into the trenches, and all that sort of thing. As a matter of fact, I've come back each day with the same man, a sort of superior farmer, a jolly interesting fellow to talk to, who smokes excellent cigars, and speaks English as well as you or I.'

'Heavens, man! I hope you don't chatter to him. How do you know who or what he is? Don't you realise that all such information as he has been asking for is of great use to the enemy?'

'Yes, yes, of course it is; but then he's a Belgian,

and lives somewhere hereabouts.'

'Do you know where?'

'No; he simply said in an off-hand sort of way that he lived near here.'

'For all you know, Skinner, the man may be a German spy; you can't be too careful. If you see him again, detain him until either the Colonel or the Brigadier has questioned him.'

'But you don't really think he's a spy, do

you?'

'I think that it is very wrong to give any information at all to anybody that you're not absolutely sure of, so don't give him any.'

Having warned Skinner, neither Oliver nor Vivian mentioned anything about the matter they had in hand, fearing lest he might betray them without thinking.

They left the room and went out into the garden, where Cheery Dick was walking up and down smoking. Seeing his masters, he took his pipe from his mouth and approached them. 'I can fix you up with them there togs,' he said. 'When do you want 'em?'

Now, since the night when Vivian had mentioned the band incident to Private Rock, that gentleman had been very docile. Directly he showed any sign of restlessness Vivian would just threaten to mention to the Colonel how it was that the Somersets had played the Wessex out of camp, and immediately Cheery became the most obedient of servants. In spite of the bold front he put on, Vivian had a strong suspicion that besides feeling a good deal of respect for a fine soldier, Richard Rock stood considerably in awe of his commanding officer.

So, when he mentioned about the 'togs,' Vivian suspected that he had been listening, and turned angrily upon him. 'What do you mean by listening to a private and confidential conversation?' he demanded sharply.

'Well, I like that!' answered Rock in an aggrieved tone. 'I'm out 'ere an' 'ears voices through the open window. 'Ow do I know as it ain't spies in the room? So I just lies doggo an' listens, 'ears what you're a-sayin', an' findin' out that it was you, off I goes, an' then you comes a-chewin' my ear. Ongrateful, sir, I calls it!'

'None of your humbug. What did you hear?'

'That you an' Mr Hastings wants a disguise, an' that I can get. An' let me tell you this, sir, that if you wants any 'elp in the job you're a-takin' on, you might do worse than 'ave Dick Rock beside you. I've stalked an Afridi up in the North-West,' and he jerked his pipe over his shoulder, as if India were just behind him; 'I've followed the spoor o' a Boer for twenty mile on end; an' I've taken—I mean I've seen—the pillow sneaked from under a man's 'ead without wakin' 'im. Trust me, I ain't sojered all my life without learnin' a thing or two, an' I ain't bin 'ere more 'n a week without gettin' the measure o' the natives.'

Vivian could not forbear smiling at the plausible old rascal, and he had to admit that, as a servant, he was excellent. Rock took care that his masters never went short of anything, and when asked where he got the various comforts and delicacies that adorned the

table, he simply jerked his thumb over his shoulder and replied vaguely, 'Oh, over there.'

The help of such a man might be very valuable, and Vivian whispered his idea to Oliver, who was quite of the same opinion. They both knew, too, that Rock could be as close as an oyster when it pleased him.

'Now, look here,' said Oliver; 'Mr Drummond and I are going to undertake a very delicate mission. We may ask your help; but if you mention a word to any one the Colonel will know all about it, and something else besides.'

Cheery tapped his nose with the forefinger of his right hand, and such an inexpressibly cunning look crossed his face that both Vivian and Oliver had to laugh.

Vivian gave him some money, and told him to procure a couple of suits, and to bring them into the house without any one knowing it.

'That's as good as done,' replied Rock. He procured the disguises; and after lunch the two subalterns, dressed as middle-class traders, left the house unnoticed. Rock followed them at a little distance, and the three made first of all down a lane that led from the back of their quarters right by the two or three dilapidated houses that were at the far end of the field the old man had been ploughing when he first aroused Vivian's suspicions.

On getting close to the houses Vivian noticed that one was considerably larger than the others, and had a stable and some outhouses belonging to it.

'Do you know who lives there?' Vivian asked of Rock.

'There's an old woman, I know, and I've seen a

'ulkin' fellow who ought to be in the army,' replied Rock; 'but which o' the shanties they live in, or whether there's any more in the family or not, I don't know.'

'Suppose we just look round,' suggested Oliver, 'while Rock keeps out of the way?'

'A good idea!' agreed Vivian.—'Keep down here in the lane, Rock, and we'll reconnoitre.'

Rock sat down under a hedge, while Oliver and Vivian went on up the lane past the building. The ground rose on each side of them; and, going some distance along, the officers climbed the bank and looked down on the houses. The two smaller had at one time or another suffered considerably from shell-fire, and were partly burnt; the largest one had a corner blown off, but was not burnt. Most of the windows were gone, and boards had been nailed across; smoke was coming from the chimney.

'Some one at home evidently!' whispered Oliver.

'Hang it, and an unpleasant somebody!' replied Vivian, as a large, savage-looking mongrel was seen sniffing about round the outhouses.

'Don't call his attention, or he'll bark, Vivian, and give the show away.'

There were no signs of sheep, cattle, or pigs, and there was no sound of work of any sort going on.

'I am afraid we sha'n't get much information this journey, Oliver. The language difficulty would betray us, or we'd go boldly up and enter into conversation, trusting to chance to find out something.'

'We'll be better prepared next time; we must think of a plan.'

They watched for some time; but there was no sign of human occupants, so they rejoined Rock.

'I've got an idea,' said Vivian. 'We'll send Rock boldly up to the house to attempt to buy eggs. He must keep his eyes open, and get hold of the dog. Then he must give us the tip, and we'll sneak up and have a look round. We may discover something.'

Rock was told what was wanted, and he immediately entered into the idea. 'You'old on'ere till you 'ear me whistlin' the "Rogue's March," he said, 'then you fire away.'

'You possibly know the "Rogue's March" better than we do,' smiled Oliver; 'I'm not sure of it, so suppose you substitute "The British Grenadiers."' 'Right you are;' and Rock took a revolver from

'Right you are;' and Rock took a revolver from his pocket and just glanced at it to see that it was loaded.

'That's mine, you old rascal!' said Oliver.

'Just so, sir; I thought you might want it, so I brought it along. As I'm stormin' the fort, so to speak, I'll take it with me. I don't stand no bloomin' shoemakin' tricks from furriners, and if any one up there'—and Cheery nodded towards the house—'interferes with Dick Rock, there'll be graves wanted afore the week's out.' And away he went.

Oliver and Vivian waited anxiously, creeping close up to the houses, and presently they heard some one lustily whistling 'The British Grenadiers.' Stepping as lightly as possible, they approached the houses, giving keen glances to right and left. The first two houses were certainly empty, and they reached the outbuildings of the third. The cowhouse was empty; a barn was falling into ruins; but in the stable a horse was rattling his headstall. They entered, and Vivian took hold of Oliver's arm.

'The very horse that was drawing the plough!' he

whispered. 'I'd swear to the rusty-gray colour of the beast, and the size of him.'

'And see! there's a saddle on a peg. Hardly looks like a saddle-horse, does he?'

They had barely time to notice that when they heard some one whistle the 'Alarm.'

'That's Rock!' cried Vivian. 'Off we go.'

Without being seen by any one, they reached the lane, the furious barking of a dog sounding behind them.

'I wonder what's up!' said Oliver nervously. 'I suppose Rock is all right.'

'Trust him! These people are Belgians, and dare not molest a British soldier. Besides, he's got the pistol, and you may be sure he would not hesitate to use it if he were in any danger. Still, if he doesn't return in five minutes we'll go up to the house and see what's happened.'

In a couple of minutes, however, they heard some one whistling a military quickstep, and saw Rock with a paper parcel in his hand coming towards them. Vivian made him a rapid signal to follow, and then strode off; nor did they stop until they were almost at their own quarters.

'Well, Rock, what happened?' they both asked when the old soldier rejoined them.

'I know what ought to ha' 'appened,' replied Rock disgustedly. 'I oughter broke the neck o' that old 'ag in the 'ouse, an' ha' brained that savage tyke o' 'ers.'

'Tell us the particulars.'

'There ain't much to tell. I goes up to the 'ouse an' gets in the kitchen, when out comes the dog, an' up goes 'is back, an' 'e begins growlin' most

'orrible. I snaps my fingers at 'im an' calls 'im good doggie; but 'e only shows 'is teeth an' grins at me in . a way as fair gave me the shivers. Then I sees a bit o' meat on a table, so I chucks 'im that, an' the way 'e wolfed it was a caution. When 'e'd done I started pattin' 'im, an', 'avin' established friendly relations, was lookin' about, when in bounces the old 'ag. I smiles an' arsts for eggs or milk, an' shows 'er a couple o' franc-pieces; but she dances about screamin' out somethin', an' makin' most 'ijous faces. I patted my stummick, pointed to my mouth, an' shook the money under 'er nose. Lumme, I should like to ha' broke 'er neck! All the time she tries to bustle me out; but I ain't takin' any, an' sits down strokin' the dog. Then she starts screamin', "One franc, one franc," an' gets a knife an' goes off. I gripped the dog's collar an' starts whistlin' to give you the tip, an' 'olds the dog like grim death till the old 'ag comes back with a lump o' cheese in paper. Then I shakes my 'ead, pretends that isn't what I want, an' we 'ollers an' screams at one another, I purposely makin' as much noise as I could. Then I suppose the dog 'eard somethin', for 'e begins growlin', an' tries to break away, an' the old woman was clearly tellin' me to let 'im go; but I 'olds on to 'is scruff, an' shook my napper as though I was afeerd o' the brute, till at last 'e was fair gettin' out o' 'and, when I whistles the "Alarm." I guessed you'd understand, so I give the old 'ag the franc an' made 'er 'old the dog, when I just shows 'er the revolver an' give 'er a gentle 'int that if she lets 'im go till I'm clear o' the show there's goin' to be trouble. The old 'ag takes the dog, an' I 'opped it, an' 'ere I am.'

'She clearly wanted to get rid of you,' said Vivian.

'No doubt about that.'

'There's something she wishes to conceal there!' exclaimed Oliver. 'We must search the place.'

'And before they've got time to remove anything.

—I don't suppose they'd think you suspected anything, Rock; but stay behind. Keep a watch on the place, and note if any one leaves or enters.'

'Right, sir.'

'When it gets dark come to the Colonel's quarters for further orders.'

Rock turned back, and Oliver and Vivian went on towards the town.

'We'll have a stroll round and keep our eyes open. We may strike lucky.'

# CHAPTER XIV.

### IMPORTANT DISCOVERIES ARE MADE.

ALTHOUGH so close to the firing-line that it was possible at any moment for a high-explosive shell to fall in its very midst, life in the little town went on much as usual. True, the ruined buildings, glassless windows, and the many closed shops were grim evidences of the war. But those people who were left were going about their usual vocations in an unconcerned fashion; and, familiar with scenes of death, the people paid no heed to them. Housewives chattered in groups; children played in the streets; farmers from the surrounding country brought in their produce; and Tommy, here, there, and everywhere, bought what he wanted, nodded to the elders, romped with the children, or smiled merrily at the girls.

Through these scenes moved Vivian and Oliver, no one taking much notice of them, though little escaped their observation. They had walked once through the town, and Oliver was beginning to think their time had been wasted, when Vivian whispered to him, 'Look over the road—the old man of the plough!'

Oliver saw a tall, thin old man, his head no longer tied in a black silk handkerchief, but wearing a highcrowned hat, sauntering along.

'Are you sure he is the man, Vivian?'

'Certain; I particularly observed his wispy gray hair. We'll follow him at a distance.'

This they did, and observed that the old man, whenever he met a group of light-hearted Tommies, would stop and smile upon them benignantly, especially if they were talking loudly among themselves. Working parties of all sorts he was interested in, and would stop and chat with them.

'Understands English, anyway,' said Oliver. 'We ought to ask these fellows what he said,' only we

should be giving ourselves away.'

'We shall have him presently,' muttered Vivian, and they kept the old man in view. When they reached the centre of the town they found that a field battery had just marched in. The gunners, hot and dusty, were exchanging greetings with men of the Wessex or Hertfords, asking for news, and accepting thankfully the drinks brought to them. The old man walked about among the dismounted drivers and the gunners, spoke a word here and there, and then went off. Oliver and Vivian followed him, and saw him make a hurried note on a scrap of paper, which he thrust into his pocket. He next made his way into a small café, in which several soldiers were seated; and presently he was joined by a man with a fair beard, and they talked earnestly for some minutes. The stranger wore a light suit, brown gaiters, and a soft brown felt hat, and had the look of a well-to-do farmer. After a few minutes the old man took the scrap of paper from his pocket and passed it to his companion. He then rose and departed. Oliver and Vivian, drinking up their coffee, also took their leave, and saw their quarry just disappearing round a corner. He left the town and made for the lane which led from the subalterns' quarters to the lonely house. As he was now getting

away from the streets, Oliver and Vivian thought it best not to follow him any farther, lest he should notice them and get suspicious.

'Rock will see him if he goes to the old house,' said Oliver; and they made for the quarters of the Colonel, to whom they related what had happened.

Soon after dark Cheery Dick arrived, brimming over with complaints and grumblings. 'What's the use o' messin' about watchin' an' spyin'?' he said. 'Why not take a file o' men, seize all inside, an' search the place?'

'Fair and softly,' said Vivian; 'that will come later. What have you discovered?'

'Naught.'

'Has any one left the house?'

'No.'

'Any one arrived?'

'Yes; a burly-lookin' young ruffian came across the fields an' whistled, when out comes the old 'ag. They talked together a few minutes, an' then the man went off. Later an old man with gray 'air came down the lane an' entered the 'ouse.'

From questions it was clear that this was the old man they had been watching during the afternoon.

'The search is getting warm,' said Oliver. 'I'm convinced that old man is up to no good. We know now he lives at the suspected house, and that he's very much interested in the movements of our troops. We must keep a close watch on him.'

Vivian and the Colonel were of the same opinion, and it was decided that a sharp lookout should be kept on the house.

'We must get rid of these disguises,' said Vivian.
'I don't think we shall need them again.'

Rock was sent over to their quarters for their uniforms; and, having changed, they were on their way back, when they almost ran against Skinner walking down the street with the stranger in the light suit and the brown felt hat. Vivian nudged Oliver, and they hurried past; but Skinner shouted out, 'Wait a minute, you fellows; I'm coming;' and he came running after them.

'Who's your friend?' asked Vivian.

'He's the very fellow I was telling you about this morning. He was asking me about a battery that came in to-day; but I remembered what you said, and told him I knew nothing about it.'

'Good boy!' said Vivian. 'I'm glad you've taken

the tip.'

After dinner, Oliver, Vivian, and Rock, each armed with a revolver, started off, and, avoiding the lane, went across the fields towards the lonely house. It was a fairly clear night, and for fear of the dog it was not deemed expedient to go too close. The three concealed themselves behind some bushes. There were lights in the lower part of the house, and from time to time some one was seen moving about between them and the building. Nothing suspicious, however, happened for fully two hours, when suddenly a red light, like the tail-light of a train, appeared on the top of the house. It was visible for only a few seconds, and then disappeared again. After an interval of a minute or so it was again shown, and again a third time.

'That's a signal,' whispered Vivian. 'What's going

to happen now?'.

They had not long to wait, for voices were heard, and then a man on horseback was seen, and a dog

was heard barking. A hoarse voice shouted, and the dog was silent; whereupon the horseman dis-

appeared, followed by the dog.

'That's lucky! We'll get closer,' said Vivian; and they crept silently forward till they reached the house, the door of which stood open. All was dark inside, though voices could be heard.

'It's a nuisance not knowing the language,' whispered Oliver; 'we might learn something.'

They crept to the stable, and found the horse was gone, as was also the saddle.

'Another clue,' said Vivian. 'Up at the front any one would notice that odd beast. We'll find out where our friend visits.'

They crept back to the house and listened, when suddenly a faint ting-ting fell upon their ears, followed in a second or so by another ting-ting, ting-ting.

'Come,' said Vivian; 'I've got an idea.'

They crept away, and when they were well out of earshot Vivian said excitedly, 'That ring we heard was a telephone bell, Oliver.'

'Well?'

'That settles the thing. A telephone would be of use only to the enemy; therefore the wire in all probability runs towards their trenches.'

'By Jove! you're right.'

'And we've got to find it, tap it, and there you are.'

'That's a brilliant idea! Come on, we must hold a council of war.'

They went over to the Colonel's quarters, and Vivian made his suggestion. With some additions and modifications, this was accepted.

'We must find a good electrician,' said the Colonel.

'There is a telegraph section in the town; I'll drop a note to the major in command, and borrow a man.'

'I should think we've got plenty of fellows in our own corps,' suggested Oliver. 'I think we ought to

keep all the kudos, if any is to be got.'

'Send Rock to request the Adjutant to step along here,' said the Colonel. 'He knows every man in the regiment, and what he was before he joined.'

The Adjutant was soon with them, and was told

how matters stood.

'I've suspected something of the kind ever since we've been here,' he said, 'and am not surprised at what you tell me. As to electricians, I could find you twenty; and perhaps a man who speaks the language here would be useful. There's a corporal in B company who was a university coach. He lived in Belgium for years, and speaks all the dialects.'

'Can he be trusted to keep his mouth shut? Because if the suspects get the least idea that they

are being watched we shall never catch them.'

'The men of whom I am thinking are quite gentlemen, sir.'

'That is enough. Send for them.'

Rock was sent with a note to the sergeant-major; and, grumbling inaudibly about being made 'mes-

senger boy,' away he went.

Very shortly two soldiers presented themselves, and one look convinced both Oliver and Vivian that they were the right stamp of men. Grime and mud and sloppy-fitting khaki could not hide the fact that they were both of a good class, and their easy manner proclaimed their breeding.

Corporal Arnold, fresh from superintending the

filling of sand-bags, was a B.A., and fully conversant with the Belgian languages; while Private Reedsdale had been a responsible official in the National Telephone Company's service. Both were informed what was required of them, and both were bound over to say not a word to any of their comrades.

'A dozen reliable old soldiers are what we want now, Lindsay,' said the Colonel to the Adjutant; 'men who won't hesitate to use a rifle or bayonet if occasion arises, but also men who are not likely to lose their heads and spoil the whole thing.'

'I can find them; but some of them may be officers, Colonel.'

'No matter.'

'And I should like to include myself.'

'If you hadn't I should have asked for your assistance.'

'Shall we assemble here?'

'Yes, I think that will be best.'

In about half-an-hour eighteen officers and men, all as keen as enthusiasm could make them, were assembled in the Colonel's quarters. A brief explanation took place; then—some armed with rifles, others with light picks and spades, Reedsdale and another man, also late of the telephone service, with long-handled iron hooks, somewhat like hoes, but with a sharp hook-like end, and the officers with revolvers—they all set out.

Proceeding from Oliver and Vivian's quarters, they posted a chain of sentries across the field at about one hundred yards distant from the lonely house, and these had strict orders to let no one pass from the side on which the house was, and to arrest any one coming from the opposite direction. No

violence was to be used unless those challenged resisted; but any show of force was to be met with bullet or bayonet. Old and experienced officers or men, amongst whom was Rock, were entrusted with the task.

Oliver crept up closer in order to give warning by a timely whistle of the approach of any one from the house; while Vivian was with Reedsdale and a few men acting under his direction.

The electrician took the lie of the house and of the German trenches, and immediately set to work searching the ground for wires. The work was carried out almost noiselessly; certainly there was not enough noise to alarm any one in the house, and Oliver lay crouched on the ground until he got chilled to the bone. But still nothing happened, and the only moving figures were the ghost-like patrolling sentries moving up and down.

Presently he saw a thick-built man emerge from the house, listen a minute or two, then stride over in the direction of the sentries. Oliver gave a warning whistle; on which the man stopped, looked all round him, and, seeing no one, went on again. One of the sentries had, however, seen and moved towards him.

''Alt, there!' cried Rock's voice, 'or you're mutton.'

A guttural reply came from the man; whereupon Rock cried, 'Stop, you slouching jackal! If you don't understand plain English, do you understand this?' and a glittering bayonet was advanced within a foot of the man's breast. The fellow stopped and dropped his hand towards his pocket as though in search of a weapon; but before he could do anything the Adjutant, revolver in hand, came up to Rock's

side, when the man, raising his cloth cap from his head, muttered something that seemed like an apology, and returned to the house, in which the lights were at once extinguished.

Oliver, when the man had disappeared, crept over to the Adjutant, and learnt that the wire had been found, that Reedsdale had already made a connection, while the second telephone man was tracing the wire to its other terminal.

The Colonel came up and joined them. 'Oliver,' he said, 'I do not think you need remain any longer watching the house. No one will attempt to pass us now. Go on down the field and join Vivian, who is following up the wire. Report to me when it is found out where it leads to.'

Glad to be on the move, away Oliver went.

## CHAPTER XV.

#### THE TRAP IS SET.

O N joining Vivian, Oliver learnt that Reedsdale, having connected up the wire from the house, was running a concealed cable to the subalterns' quarters.

'Arnold is there, and will tap any message going over the wire,' explained Vivian, 'and we are trying to trace the other terminal. One of our men was a London linesman, and is as good as Reedsdale himself.'

This man followed the wire, which had been laid in one of the furrows, right across the field, and then for some distance along a ditch. It was carefully dug in under a lane, and it took a long time to find on the other side. Eventually it was discovered that it went right along towards the trenches, where the noise of intermittent firing grew louder and louder, and the occasional flare of German star-lights could be plainly seen.

All trace of the cable was lost at a road that ran almost parallel to the support-trenches, and fully an hour was spent in fruitless search. The men engaged were several times challenged by various British patrols, and Vivian had each time to explain the business they were on, and to satisfy the officers that they were really what they pretended to be.

After a longer delay than usual, Vivian said, 'You go back to the Colonel, Oliver, and report progress;

you can be of no use here. I will see this thing through, and return as quickly as possible.'

Oliver did as his chum ordered, and on his return to his quarters found the Colonel there, Skinner fast asleep, Crawford all agog to hear the news, and Harris on duty.

In the attic, with the Colonel, was Arnold, sitting on a box with a receiver to his ear, paper and pencil before him, and a telephone mouthpiece in his hand. There was a lantern on the floor, and a couple of blankets had been hung before the window by means of forks stuck in the window-frame.

The Colonel looked pleased. 'We're on the right track,' he said to his son when he entered. 'Arnold has already intercepted a message in the Walloon dialect. Some one rang up and asked whether the destination of the field battery had yet been discovered, and the answer came back, "No." Then the speaker went on to say that soldiers were carrying out some movements on the old dike field, which is presumably the name of the ploughed field, and that Philip had been stopped from crossing the field by a sentry and threatened with death. The speaker was evidently alarmed; but the man at the other end of the line pooh-poohed the idea, said the English were too big fools to suspect anything, and bade the speaker go on with his work. He added that he would ring through at noon for news; and he particularly wanted to discover when we were going to move up to the front-line trenches, and what regiment we were going to relieve.'

'By Jove, dad! that's good news. Surely we have enough evidence to arrest the lot now.'

'Enough to arrest, Oliver, but not to convict.

We have the means, and I hope to take the miscreants red-handed. I have arranged for the house in the lane to be watched, and at the least sign that the spies are likely to slip through our fingers they will be arrested. Now, will you relieve Arnold, and let him get a sleep? Wake him if you hear anything on the wire. I must see the Brigadier.'

Oliver took over the receiver, and a couple of hours passed, during which it was as much as he could do to keep awake. Then Vivian returned with the news that they had traced the cable to a farmhouse just behind the British trenches; but that, people being astir there, they had not entered.

Vivian, Crawford, and Oliver took turns till daylight at listening; and Rock, full of grumbles, came

up presently to say breakfast was ready.

'What all this bloomin' fuss about a parcel o' dirty spies is for beats me,' he said. 'If the Adjutant 'adn't come up I'd ha' given that scoundrel last night enough cold iron to ha' settled 'is goose, an' six feet o' rope would ha' done the business o' the old man an' the 'ag at the 'ouse, when we all might 'ave gone comfortably to bed. I suppose the Colonel knows what 'e's doin', but it ain't the way we'd ha' done things in the old Fightin' Fifth—not by long chalks.'

'That's all right, Cheery,' said Oliver. 'You'll be

in at the death, never fear.'

'If I ain't some one'll 'ear about it,' growled Cheery. 'I ain't goin' to spend a night out o' bed

for nothin', I 'ope.'

At breakfast Rock heard the officers talking about the information already obtained, and he pricked up his ears. Later on he told Vivian and Oliver he wanted a word or two in private.

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'I've 'elped a good many Generals with ideas,' he said modestly, 'and if I'd ha' 'ad my deserts, I'd ha' been in command o' a reg'ment instead o' bein' ordered about by kids who wasn't born when I was fightin' my country's battles.'

'If we all had our deserts, Rock, some of us might be in very different positions,' said Vivian gravely.

'True for you, sir.'

'In prison, for instance.'

- 'Bah, Mr Drummond! you can never let a dead dog lie. Anyway, 'ere's my idea. I understands as this 'ere telephone affair is joined up with the spies' machine.'
  - 'That is so.'
    - 'And they wants news?'

'Emphatically.'

- 'Then give it to 'em.'
- 'How do you mean?'
- 'They wants to know when our crowd is goin' in the trenches.'
  - 'Yes.'
  - 'Do you know why?'

'I guess why.'

'It's because the 'Uns thinks our mob'll make a mess o' things, an' they mean to jump their trench. D' ye follow me?'

'Perfectly.'

'Tell'em, then; only let's 'ave some real fightin' men to meet 'em, 'oist 'em with their own petard. Savvy?'

'By Jove! there's sense in what you say.'

'Sense! It's genius—the genius that wins battles. An' you youngsters can take the kudos. Dick Rock don't want no orders, nor mention in despatches; 'e only wants peace an' quietness.'

'That's what brought him out here, I suppose,' laughed Oliver.

However, the idea was communicated to the Colonel, who at once saw the possibilities. The Brigadier was consulted, and a plan was arranged. The Wessex were ordered to pack up for a move to the front. It was openly announced that they were to relieve the Wiltshires the next day; and so that the news might get to the right source, Oliver was sent with an interpreter to the lonely house to ask the old man if he had any wagons that he could spare, as the Wessex were going to the front, and were short of transport.

Accordingly, with an interpreter, Oliver went up to the house, and was met by the dog, which growled and would not let him approach. Oliver drew his revolver and shouted out to attract attention; whereupon the man Philip came running out, followed by the old man. Oliver, first in English, then in French and German, told them to call off the dog, or he would shoot it; but they shook their heads as though not understanding, on which Oliver bade the interpreter repeat his words.

Then Philip seized the dog's collar, and Oliver bade the interpreter ask if either of them understood English, French, or German.

The interpreter asked, and replied that they did not.

'Lie No. 1,' thought Oliver, for from inquiries made it had been discovered that the old man had asked many of the Wessex questions in English.

The following conversation then took place through the interpreter.

'Tell him,' said Oliver, 'that my regiment, the

Wessex Fusiliers, is going to the trenches, and we want to purchase transport wagons. Has he got any?'

'He says he has not,' translated the interpreter.

'Can he tell us where we can get any?'

'No.'

'Has he any horses?'

'No.'

'Tell him to treat what I have said in confidence.'

'He says he will.'

'Ask him if that man is his son.'

'He is.'

'Will he take employment as a team-driver under the British?'

The son was seen to scowl at these words, and the interpreter said the old man's reply was that he could not spare him.

'Ask him why he is not serving in the army.'

'Because he is not medically fit,' came the reply.

'Well, tell him not to wander about at night; it's unhealthy,' concluded Oliver meaningly; and then they departed, followed by the scowls of both father and son.

The trap having been set, there was nothing to do but to await events. The Wessex were very busy packing kits, and Vivian and Arnold sat with ears glued to the telephone awaiting results. A watch was set on the old man and his son; and, soon after Oliver had left, the old man went down into the town, mixing freely with the soldiers, and keeping his ears open, though he said but little.

He returned to the house about eleven o'clock, and then he and his son strolled out into the field. But in order to prevent any interference from them, halfa-dozen men under a corporal had been instructed to busy themselves taking measurements of the field, and to let no one pass while they were thus engaged; so the old man and Philip turned back into the house.

Meanwhile, full of expectancy, Vivian, Crawford (who was an expert stenographer), and Arnold sat up in the darkened attic listening by turns at the receiver. It was not until about one o'clock that a call came, and instantly Crawford had note-book and pencil ready, while Vivian stood by to take the receiver did the conversation take place in either French or German.

Arnold placed the palm of his left hand firmly over the mouthpiece of the telephone, so that nothing that happened in the room could be heard by either of the speakers at the other two terminals; then he listened, and, translating into English, clearly repeated the conversation, which Crawford wrote in shorthand.

- 'Hallo! hallo! are you there?'
- 'Yes, I'm here.'
- 'Who is it?'
- 'Mairin.'
- 'God bless the Kaiser!'
- 'And punish England!'

This was evidently an agreed signal between them.

- 'Have you any news of the battery?'
- 'No. I believe it is going to stop here; but I have learnt that the Wessex regiment of infantry go into trenches to-morrow night.'
- 'Ha! that is news, if it is true; but are you certain?'
  - 'Quite. An insolent junior officer came up here

this morning, and wanted to hire a wagon. It was from him that I learnt the news.'

'And did you lend him a wagon?'

'No; I had none.'

'Fool! Why didn't you get one, and send that son of yours with it as driver? It would have been worth much to us. You always bungle when left to yourself.'

'And you are always grumbling, Hermann.'

'Do you know what regiment the Wessex relieve?'

'Yes; I found that out in the town, and I wrote it down. Wait, I must find the paper; it was some cursed foreign word. Ah! here it is. I will spell it. V-i-l-t-s-h-i-r-e-s.'

'I know, Wiltshires is what you mean. When do the Wessex leave?'

'I have not found out.'

'Well, try to do so, and telephone; no, show the usual signal. There, if I have anything to tell you I will telephone. Meanwhile send Philip over with Bruno. I must get the news away. Now keep your eyes and ears open, and show the danger-signal if anything suspicious happens.'

The conversation then ceased, and immediately Crawford and Vivian went to the Colonel, while Arnold remained at the instrument. The news was so important that the Brigadier, on hearing it, at once went to the front with Colonel Hastings in order that the final arrangements might be made to ensure the success of their plan.

Vivian, with a small party, was sent off to the lonely farmhouse to make sure of the gentleman in the brown felt hat; while Oliver had full instructions respecting the old man, whose name, it appeared, was

Mairin. Arnold remained in charge of the telephone, and with him were Harris and Skinner.

Everything that had been overheard on the telephone was clear except the reference to Bruno. Who he was had yet to be found out, and Oliver, armed with a pair of powerful field-glasses, kept a constant watch on the lonely house. He soon saw the man Philip set out, accompanied by the dog, when it at once occurred to him that the dog was Bruno. What part he played in the scheme was yet to be found out. Some two hours later Philip returned by himself.

An hour after sunset the Wessex Fusiliers, in heavy marching order, moved off for the trenches.

Oliver, armed with a revolver, under cover of darkness posted Crawford and a dozen men in positions all round the ruinous house, with orders to stop any one leaving, but to let any one pass towards it. Crawford was to rush in with his men on hearing shots or Oliver's whistle.

Then Oliver, with Rock, creeping on hands and knees, approached the house, and, relying on the absence of the dog, crept up to the door, which was, as usual, open. The two had, for the purpose, drawn on over their ordinary boots a pair of india-rubber trench-boots, which enabled them to move about without making the slightest noise.

Creeping in at the front-door—Rock with a drawn bayonet, the only weapon he carried, in his hand—they went along the passage, but they could hear no sound. They came to a flight of stairs, up which they crept, passing a landing, then on till they came to an attic in which was a lot of lumber. One corner of the roof being blown off, they could see the sky,

and Oliver, with the aid of his pocket electric torch, examined the attic. Besides the lumber, the only thing it contained was a large lamp.

'This is evidently used for signalling,' he whispered to Rock. 'We shall be able to see our friend at work

perhaps.'

'Nail 'im in the act,' said Rock, feeling the edge of his bayonet lovingly.

'Do nothing without my orders; we have to give

him time to telephone, remember.'

They concealed themselves behind the lumber, and waited what seemed to them a very long time, during which they occasionally heard movements and voices below. Presently a heavy footstep was heard entering the house, and the voices of the old man and his son became audible. In a few minutes some one began ascending the stairs, and Oliver pressed Rock's arm in token that he was to be as still as a mouse. They were both well concealed, and did not fear discovery. A gleam of light was seen, and then the old man, carrying a round stable-lantern, entered the attic. He crossed to the far end without looking round, took down a wooden shutter that concealed a window, and lit the big lamp, which showed a red and a green light. For a minute or so he was busy, showing the red light and dropping it below the window-frame; then he extinguished it and went downstairs.

No sooner had the sound of his footsteps died away than Oliver whispered to Rock, 'Follow me quietly.'

They crept down the stairs to the ground-level, where they heard the old woman bustling about in the kitchen. The old man, however, had descended

another flight of stairs; and, following him, Oliver and Rock beheld a curious sight.

The old man, his lantern hung on an iron peg, was standing with his back turned towards them. He had opened what looked like a wall of solid bricks, but which Oliver afterwards found was an iron door with bricks cemented on it, and from a recess had taken a telephone. Almost at the same moment that Oliver arrived there was a faint tinkle, and then the old man, speaking in German, but with a foreign accent, was heard to say, 'Are you there, Hermann? Right! The troops have started; nothing is suspected here; all is quiet. What? The Colonel is pleased. Good! good! I shall wait further instructions. I will try to find out about the guns, and now the infantry have gone may be successful. I rather fancied they suspected something. All right. Look out for the arrival of the troops; they will be with you in an hour, ready to go into the trenches to-morrow night. Good-night.

He replaced the instrument, closed the door, and unhung the lantern. Then he turned to find himself face to face with Oliver and Private Rock.

### CHAPTER XVI.

#### HOW IT WORKED.

POR a couple of moments he stood, his face pale, his eyes staring; then Oliver cried out in German, 'You are my prisoner. Don't pretend that you do not understand me, for I have just heard you speaking in German.'

'Ah-h!' Mairin gave a sort of gasping cry, and from under his jacket he drew a long-bladed knife.

'Drop it, or I'll shoot you,' cried Oliver; but as he spoke Mairin dashed the lantern to the ground, and his son, who had heard what had taken place, literally hurled himself down the few stairs and knocked Rock almost breathless.

'You bloomin' 'eathen!' growled Rock, and there ensued a noise of fierce scuffling.

Oliver felt something swish close to him, and a burning pain in his left arm told him he had been wounded. He fired twice rapidly, and the flashes of his revolver lighting up the pitch darkness showed Mairin close to him. Oliver threw his arms round him, holding his wrists firmly, and a desperate struggle in the darkness ensued.

'Pistol the brute!' cried Rock. 'I've got a 'andful with this fellow;' and, bumping against Oliver, he brought him and the old man to the ground, himself falling with his antagonist, so that in a minute all four were struggling, fighting, and wrestling on the floor in the dark. Both Mairin and his son kept

shouting out something in Belgian, the while they struggled, till a piercing shriek behind Oliver made him fear for Rock's safety.

'Hallo! are you hurt?' he cried.

'Not much; it's this 'Un what's got it in the neck.'

'Don't kill him if you can help it,' gasped 'Oliver; for the old man was a wiry customer, and Oliver had as much as he could do to prevent himself being stabbed.

Suddenly a light was seen at the top of the stairs, and the old woman, screaming out something, appeared. Then she rapidly emptied a revolver down into the darkness, apparently not caring whether she hit friend or foe.

The old man shouted out, whereupon she coolly began reloading; and, having finished, with a lamp in her hand she was about to descend the stairs, when a rush of footsteps sounded, and half-a-dozen khakiclad figures appeared.

'Seize the old woman!' cried Oliver. 'Then come down here with the lamp.'

There was the noise of a struggle, a series of screams, a shot or two, then Crawford's voice calling out like one leading a forlorn hope, 'Forward, my lads; follow me! Our comrades are in danger. Charge bayonets!' With a lamp in one hand and a revolver in the other, he ran down the stairs.

'There ain't no need for a fuss,' cried Rock. 'The fightin''s over; all we want now is a burial party.'

Crawford held aloft his lamp and stared round in astonishment.

Rock, bayonet in hand, was calmly sitting on the body of Philip, who was bleeding from a thrust in

the side, and gasping for breath. Oliver had succeeded in mastering Mairin, and was kneeling on his chest, holding his two wrists. In a couple of minutes he was secured, as was Philip. The old woman's shots had fortunately done no harm, as she had fired at random.

The prisoners were carried upstairs, the younger man's wound bound up, and then, with the old woman, they were left under the charge of several men while Oliver proceeded to search the house.

The lumber in the attic was turned over, the sleeping-rooms were examined, but nothing incriminating was found. In one of the lower rooms was a small oaken bureau, which, on being smashed open, was found to contain a number of papers. There was no time then to examine anything, so Oliver pushed them all into his haversack.

With Rock he next descended to the cellar to examine the telephone, and see if he could discover anything else. He was busily engaged, when there was a low, snarling growl behind him, and the dog Bruno, which had appeared apparently from nowhere, sprang at him and attempted to fasten its fangs in his throat. He had only time to seize it by the long hair and attempt to hold it, when it turned its head aside and bit through his tunic, all the time wildly struggling to get free. Oliver, with his wounded arm, could not have kept it off for more than a minute, so strong and fierce was it; and did it get its long yellow fangs well embedded in the flesh he knew it would not let go in a hurry. He staggered back from the snarling beast; but Rock, always ready in an emergency, whipped out his bayonet and passed it through the dog's body.

Bruno dropped to the ground, yelping and snapping savagely at its wound, which was clearly a fatal one.

'These 'ere 'Un dogs ain't been properly trained,' growled Rock. 'A-snappin' an' bitin' at English people! I ain't forgiven 'im for snappin' at me the other mornin'.'

'Poor brute! it was only doing its duty,' said Oliver. 'It is faithful to its own master, anyhow, and it sha'n't linger in agony;' and, drawing his revolver, he shot it through the head. The dog moving just as he pulled the trigger, the bullet, besides passing through its brain, cut through the collar, which fell from its neck.

'I'll keep this as a memento,' said Oliver, and, picking it up, he pushed that also into his haversack.

The search being finished, the wounded Philip was laid on a bed, and a man was sent off into the town for medical assistance. Mairin and his wife were secured and locked in the large upper room, an armed sentry being placed on the door. Crawford, with a sergeant and six men, was then left in charge, with orders to keep the sentries on the alert, and not to allow any one to enter the house without a written order from Colonel Hastings.

Oliver had the gash in his arm bound up, and then, with the remainder of the men, marched off after the regiment, which he found about midnight billeted just by the brigade headquarters. He at once sought the Colonel to make his report, and there he found Vivian.

Colonel Hastings was very much pleased to hear of the successful capture of the Mairins. 'I believe we shall succeed in bringing to book a dangerous gang of spies,' he said. 'Many plans have miscarried

and many lives have been lost of late, the General tells me, through news of our movements getting into the enemy's possession. And the chief credit of the capture will certainly lie with you two boys. After your experience with that scoundrel Löffel at home, you ought to be created detectives-in-chief.'

'What's happened to Master Brownhat?' asked

Oliver.

'Safe under lock and key,' replied Vivian.

'How did you manage it?'

'Very simply. I marched my men up and surrounded the farmhouse. I then watched through my night-glasses for a signal from Mairin, but could not see one. We did see, however, that there was some one moving about on the roof of the farmhouse, and it is pretty certain that from that elevation Mairin's place could be seen. While our gentleman was on the roof a couple of the men quietly forced a window, and they and I crept in. The place was all in darkness; but presently we heard some one descending the stairs. We waited a few minutes, and were following him downstairs to the basement, when our man came running back again. We were all provided with powerful electric torches, which we turned on to him. In a second almost he had whipped out a revolver and fired, wounding one of the men in the shoulder; but that was his last shot, for with a stick I was carrying I gave him one on the wrist that made him yell out, and knocked the revolver flying. Next moment we had him fast. I told him in German that he was my prisoner; but he never opened his mouth, so we marched him off, and the Colonel has seen him comfortably lodged. I left a party in possession of the farmhouse, in which we found two

old servants, whom we also put under arrest. As we were leaving a dog came along towards the house, and I tried to catch it. It snapped at me, however, and in the darkness I lost it. I wonder now whether it was the Bruno those men spoke of.'

'Was it the big, upstanding animal that we saw at the house in the lane?' asked Oliver.

'Something like it, as far as I could see.'

'I shouldn't be at all surprised if it were the same. It certainly was a most intelligent brute, and perhaps, finding things were wrong with Brownhat, it hurried off to Mairin. I was really sorry it was killed, though it would certainly have done for me if Rock hadn't come to my assistance. And that reminds me that my bullet cut its collar in two, and I kept it as a memento of a faithful servant, though only a dog;' and Oliver took the collar, a massive leather and brass affair, from his haversack.

He handed it to Vivian, who was looking at the way in which the bullet had cut the leather and bent the brass, when his eye caught sight of what seemed like a movable plate on the brass which the bullet had bent. 'Hallo!' he said; 'what's this?'

'Looks like a sort of locket affair,' replied Oliver,

greatly interested.

Instantly the two subalterns and the Colonel were picking away at it with their penknives, when presently a lid was forced open, and in a little recess a tiny scrap of paper was seen.

'By Jingo! I believe we've made another discovery,

boys!' cried the Colonel.

'There's no end to Hunnish ingenuity,' said Oliver, and, picking out the bit of paper, he handed it to his father.

On unfolding it, the Colonel saw it was covered with writing in the German character. 'Here, you boys, I must depend on you to decipher this,' he said; 'my education was, I am afraid, neglected.'

Oliver and Vivian carefully flattened out the paper,

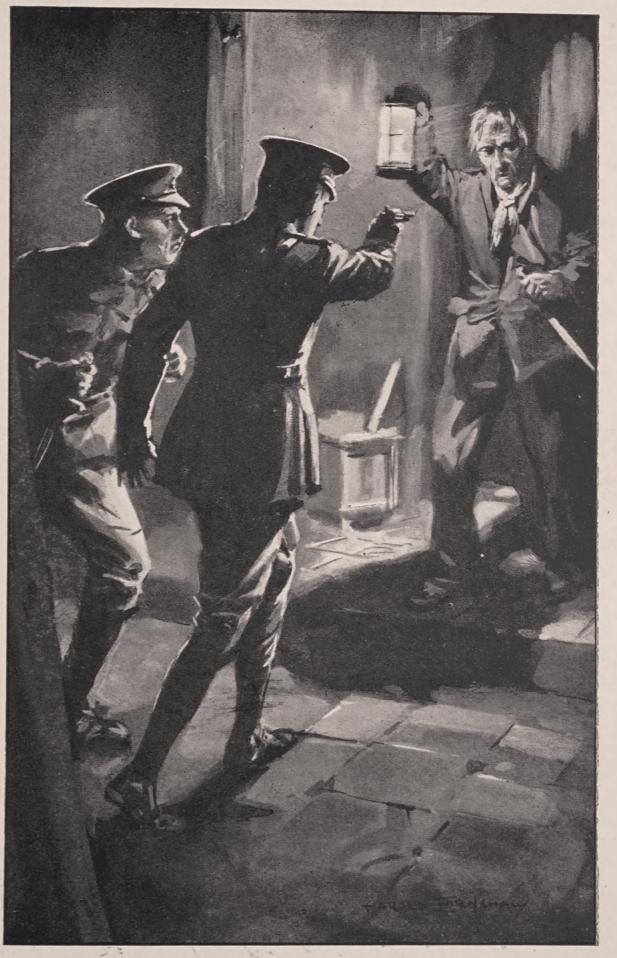
and read it together, each helping the other.

'This is the most important news of all,' said Vivian presently; 'it's from the lieutenant-colonel of the 8th Prussian Grenadiers. Listen; I'll translate it:

"Dear Hermann,—Your news is most important. We know exactly the position of the Wiltshire regiment, and when the Territorials take over their trenches to-morrow night we shall make an attack. We shall surprise their front trench, and then advance in force quietly, fill the trench with our men, make a sudden attack down the communication trenches, and with machine-guns clear the support and reserve trenches. These carried, a division will advance and make a big effort to push right through and entirely break the British line. I shall report your services in the right quarter, and if we succeed high reward will be both yours and mine.—Yours,

"M. VON SCHWEINIKEN,
Lieutenant-Colonel,
8th Pr. Grenadier Guard Regt."

'The scoundrels!' cried Colonel Hastings. 'Thank God we've found this out! It might have meant a most disastrous defeat for us. I must see the General, for not a moment must be lost in laying our plans to defeat this attempt. Come, boys, your evidence will be wanted. Guard that paper as your life, Vivian. All our brains must get to work to checkmate this new piece of Prussian rascality.'



Mairin gave a sort of gasping cry, and from under his jacket he drew a long-bladed knife.

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O.H.



# CHAPTER XVII.

#### THE BITER BIT.

WENTY-FOUR hours later, in a certain portion of the British trenches, great excitement prevailed. Standing on the fire-step, straining every nerve to see through the darkness, were a number of the Wessex Fusiliers. Colonel Hastings, Oliver, Vivian, and Captain Lindsay were amongst the officers, and Rock was one of the few chosen men. The trench was only lightly held, however, old and tried veterans of the Wiltshires being the principal occupants.

During the day a plan had been formulated and perfected. At the usual time in the evening a picked party of the Wessex had filed along the communication-trenches into the front one. Colonel Hastings had begged hard to be allowed to accompany the party; and though the General told him commanding officers were strictly forbidden to expose themselves unnecessarily, the Colonel had at last

carried his point.

'I have trained my lads so that they should stand the supreme test of keeping cool and doing their duty under fire,' he had pleaded. 'My presence will give them confidence; and, besides, I am anxious to see for myself how they behave.'

'As you like, Colonel; only, mind I have warned

you.'

During the last few days things had been very o.H.

quiet on the Wiltshires' front; there had been occasional sniping, but neither side had been in any way active. The Wessex had, apparently, relieved the Wiltshires without suffering any loss, though some promiscuous firing had taken place that caused certain of the 'new hands' to feel a little jumpy.

Presumably, then, things had settled down in the usual way in the British trenches. Some men had been told every now and then to fire their rifles into the darkness, at nothing, as men are wont to do from sheer nerve tension the first time they find themselves in pitch darkness, standing on the fire-step of a trench, staring over towards the enemy trenches, perhaps only some eighty yards away. Brother Fritz probably chuckled, and pictured to himself the sentries' comrades asleep in the dugouts, and not a soul among them ever dreaming of the surprise in store for them.

Had he, however, seen to right and left silent figures crawling out over the parapet with sand-bags, with which small redoubts were being made; had he seen the support and communication trenches literally packed with men, all sitting down in absolute silence, not able to move to right or left, but waiting the word to commence work, perhaps he would not have waited so complacently for the signal to move.

The night was dark, and everything was in favour of the Boches, had only the secret of their little scheme not leaked out.

'It's jumpy work, this waiting,' said Oliver to Vivian as, with their heads just raised above the parapet, they stood staring and listening.

Rock, who was never far away from his masters,

grinned cheerfully. 'I guess it'll be a bit more jumpy for them 'Uns,' he said. 'I 'ope they'll reach the trench, for I ain't 'ad an opportunity o' gettin' 'ome with the baynit since the scrap at Atbara.'

'They'll reach the trench right enough,' answered Vivian; 'and, remember, you're to retire directly we

do. You know the plan; don't run your head into

unnecessary danger.'

'That's all right, sir. I can rumble a ruse as well as any one.'

The nonchalance of Rock was contagious; and though amongst those in the trench there was a feeling of impatience, of strained anxiety, there was certainly no fear.

Presently Oliver, who was listening with his ear pressed against the parapet, thought he heard move-ments out in the dark. He whispered to Vivian and the Colonel, who also thought they heard something like the stealthy crawling forward of a number of men. Then an occasional snip, as of some one cutting the barbed wire, was heard, and it was pretty clear that the Boches had started their surprise attempt.

Whispered instructions were passed down the trench, and every one was warned not to fire until two blasts on a whistle were heard.

According to a prearranged plan, some one started a gramophone, and the enemy no doubt laughed inwardly to think what a rough awakening was in store for the 'English swine.'

Notwithstanding, it was a most anxious time, and by allowing the enemy to cut the wire entanglements great risks were being taken that nothing but ultimate complete success would justify.

Presently through the darkness occasional shadowy

figures were seen moving about, and Colonel Hastings thought that the moment for action had arrived. He blew two sharp notes on his whistle, and instantly a hundred vicious spits of flame spurted out all along the trench and a volley rang forth. A hoarse shout followed, and there was a rush of heavy footsteps. Rapid fire was the order, and the volleys crashed out. The enemy, however, being so near, in a minute had reached the front-line trench, and had hurled themselves over the parapet into it, many meeting death on the bayonets of the defenders. For a moment or two a hideous combat was waged in the darkness, bayonet and clubbed rifle being used with deadly effect.

Three burly Germans dropped into the trench almost on top of Oliver, one firing his rifle so close to him that his face was burnt. A bullet from his revolver dropped one; but the other two made a rush at him, when Rock bayoneted one in the throat. As the other turned to run, Vivian shot him through the heart. The enemy came pouring into the trench, though, and bombs were hurled from above. Oliver, Vivian, and Rock were again engaged, and moved away to their left, where they just caught a glimpse of Colonel Hastings struggling with a gigantic German officer. Rock's bayonet disposed of him; whereupon Colonel Hastings gave the three arranged blasts on his whistle, and those in the advanced trench made for the communication-trenches, into which they crowded, leaving their first trench in the enemy's hands.

Then a rocket was sent up by the enemy, and dozens of voices were heard shouting that the trench was taken, and the supports were to rush forward.

Another three blasts on Colonel Hastings's whistle were the signal for every Englishman to retire, then one long blast, and from the extreme left a machine-gun opened fire, sweeping the trench with a hail of lead. Some of the traverses had been removed, and the bullets cut through the enemy, slaying almost every man. Colonel Hastings gave another signal, and a dozen Verrey lights flared out, making the whole scene as light as day.

'Forward, now, my lads!' cried the Colonel; 'clear the trench!' and into it they swept. Those of the enemy left alive fought stubbornly, but they were either bayoneted or shot. The men, mostly of the Wiltshires, having regained the trench, mounted the fire-step, and opened with rapid fire on a dense mass of men seen approaching. They were in such numbers, though, that they would have broken down all opposition; but, with an appalling crash from either side, halfa-dozen concealed machine-guns opened, catching the advancing Germans in an enfilade fire. The hurricane of lead cut through and through them, literally mowing them down, while from their front a sheet of rifle-fire smote them. The advance came to a stop; but the second line caught up with the remnants of the first, forcing it farther forward, until the exterminating machine-guns swept that away. The third wave, advancing with less confidence, broke into a sort of half-hearted shout, and pressed forward. They in turn were caught up in the hail of lead, and for a few moments staggered; then they threw themselves on the ground, and opened fire with their rifles. They had, however, no chance; the machineguns searched the ground, and they had to lie perfectly prone to secure any chance of escape.

The officer in command of the Wiltshires pushed his way to Colonel Hastings. 'We must pitchfork the beggars back to their trenches, sir,' he said. 'I'm going to loose my boys at them with the bayonet.'

'I'm with you,' replied the Colonel, and in a minute or so Wiltshires and Wessex were racing towards the defeated Huns. These had now to get on their feet and fight for their lives or be trampled under foot and bayoneted. Many were slain, many surrendered, and in two minutes the few survivors were flying back towards their trenches, pursued by the fire of the victorious British.

The Wessex, in their inexperience, would have gone right on to the German trenches; but the wily Wiltshires checked their impetuosity, and all returned safely.

'Now, Colonel,' said the Wiltshire officer, 'we must repair the wire entanglements. Brother Fritz won't lie down quietly under such a smashing blow. We shall hear again from him before the night's out, or I'm a Dutchman. If you'd like your men to get a little experience in barbed-wire repairing, now's their chance.'

'I should indeed;' and, crawling quietly out, some forty or fifty men were soon working for their lives repairing the barbed wire. This was the most trying part of the night's work. Very soon the enemy guessed what was going on, and opened a hot fire from rifles and machine-guns. They sent up flares, and then every man had to fling himself face downward flat on the ground among the dead and wounded Germans. The deadly gr-r-r of the machine-guns was followed by a blast of lead, and the motionless

men felt their hair rising until the flares burnt out and the machine-guns ceased.

'Weird business this, Vivian,' whispered Oliver; 'a

new experience.'

'And a deucedly unpleasant one,' muttered Vivian.
'I, for one, shall be glad to get back to the trench.'

It was the fact of so many Germans lying on the ground that saved the British from heavy casualties, for when the flares went up it was impossible to distinguish dead or dying Germans from motionless Britishers.

At last the task was performed, and the men began to creep back to their trenches. As Oliver and Vivian were following the men, in the darkness they kicked against a man, who uttered a groan.

'Sorry!' muttered Oliver.

- 'Don't leave me here to die slowly,' said a voice in German; 'put your bayonet through me or get me medical aid.'
  - 'Where are you hurt?' inquired Oliver.
  - 'Shot through both legs,' groaned the man.
  - 'Can you give a hand, Vivian?' asked Oliver.
- 'Leave 'im where 'e is,' growled Rock, who, as ever, was close to his masters.

'That remark is unworthy of an old soldier,' said Vivian. 'Give us a hand, Rock.'

But at that moment another flare went up, and all who were not safely back in the trench had again to throw themselves flat. Once more the machine-guns rattled out; but from the British trenches they got as good as they sent; and when the fire ceased, Oliver, Vivian, and Rock, the last-named grumbling unceasingly, got the wounded German into the British trench.

'Hallo, boys!' said Colonel Hastings, who saw

them clambering over the parapet; 'I'm glad to see you safe. But what have you got here?'

'A wounded 'Un, sir,' growled Rock, 'what ought to ha' been left where 'e was if all I've 'eard about 'em is true.'

A couple of lanterns being obtained, it was seen that the wounded German was an officer, evidently of high rank.

'It seems we've made an important capture,' said Oliver to the German. 'I thought you were a private.'

'And you took all that trouble with one you thought a common soldier?'

'A common soldier, as you call him, is as much to us as an officer.'

'I always said you English were fools.'

'It's our idea of playing the game.'

'Bah! you'll find war is no game before you've done with it. You English have played games until you look upon everything as games and sport. We shall convince you some day that war is grim earnest.'

'You've been trying to do that for some time now, but it hasn't met with much success.'

'We should have given you a lesson to-night had we not been fooled. We were expecting to meet only Territorials; but some one betrayed our plans.'

'Ah, playing with edged tools is dangerous work. You thought to trap us, but fell into a trap yourselves, I'm afraid.'

The wounded man ground his teeth in rage. 'Some day your regular troops will come to an end, and your Territorials will have to face us; then you will see.'

- 'We have seen; we are Territorials.'
- 'Are you really the Wessex Fusiliers?'
- 'We are; but how did you know that?'
- 'That I refuse to say,' replied the German. 'But are you really Territorials?'
- 'Sir, when a British officer makes a statement you may believe it,' said Oliver haughtily.
- 'By the way,' asked Vivian, 'whom have we the honour of conversing with?'
- 'I am Colonel von Schweiniken, of the 8th Prussian Grenadier Guard Regiment.'

Vivian whistled. 'By Jove!' he said, 'this is a coincidence with a vengeance.'

'What do you mean?' asked the German.

'I fancy I had the pleasure of reading a confidential little note of yours the other night.'

The wounded man glared savagely at the two young officers. 'A thousand devils!' he muttered; 'he can't have betrayed us? If he has'—— Then he added suspiciously, 'And you two, you speak German almost like natives! Who are you? Are you Englishmen?'

'Assuredly.'

'And yet so few of your countrymen speak our language! I am muddled—faint—I'—— He turned a shade paler, and fainted from loss of blood. Brandy was immediately given him, and his wounds, which, though severe, were not dangerous, were bound up. Presently a stretcher was obtained, and he took his place in the line of men being carried to the rear, his last words being, 'Gott strafe England!'

'Pleasant old gent!' said Oliver.

'A good modern German,' replied Vivian; 'but his capture is important. We shall probably now be

able to bring their guilt home to all that amiable gang of spies.'

Soon after that the Germans opened a heavy artillery fire on the trenches, and all had to take shelter in the dugouts. The shells fell in great numbers, literally blowing to pieces a number of the dead and wounded Germans lying in the 'no man's land' between the trenches. Their screams and groans caused many a British Tommy, who had never flinched at the dangers he had passed through that night, to stop his ears with his fingers.

Then, acme of madness, the enemy actually launched another infantry attack, which was literally swept away, not a man passing the British wire entanglements.

'By Jove! the Boches are, indeed, angry to-night,' said the officer in command of the Wiltshires. 'They never chuck away a whole battalion unless they're very cross. Some one will have to toe the line over the bad success of this night's work if he hasn't already answered the last call.'

'I fancy one of the promoters of this abortive strafing expedition is in our hands,' said Oliver; 'but it's a long tale, and I'll tell you some other time.'

'Come into my dugout, the two of you, and spin me the yarn. I'll just give my subalterns the tip to keep their eyes open; but we sha'n't be disturbed any more to-night, I expect. Even Brother Fritz must realise that he's lost this rubber, anyway.'

# CHAPTER XVIII.

### FRITZ RETALIATES.

HE day following the abortive attack of the Germans was dull and drizzling. As soon as it was light several men of the Wessex poked their heads up over the parapet to view the scene of the struggle. It was a terrible sight. Dead and wounded Germans lay in heaps in every conceivable attitude of human agony, weapons and accoutrements were scattered about, while every now and then a head or an arm would move, and a piteous cry for Wasser (water) would rouse the listeners to pity.

Hardly a minute elapsed, however, before shots rang out, and several of the Wessex had narrow escapes, while one poor lad fell back into his chum's arms dead, a bullet in his brain. The Wessex were learning that the German sniper is always on the

alert.

A dozen shots replied from the British trench; but there was nothing visible at which to aim, and

probably no harm was done.

The officers went along the trenches, warning the men on no account to expose so much as a finger, and showing them how to use the periscopes. By means of these it was found that no fewer than eight hundred German bodies lay in front of the British trenches.

'They've paid a heavy price for their attempt, Oliver,' said Vivian.

'True; and it seems horrible to leave the poor wounded wretches out there to die.'

'What can we do? If any of our men ventured above the parapet they'd have a machine-gun trained on them in a minute.'

'That's so, and that's what makes this war so terrible. But the Germans have set the fashion, and we can do nothing but follow it.'

'I wonder 'ow long we're agoin' to be in this 'ere sewer?' growled a voice behind them; and, turning, they saw Rock.

'The last time I was in the trenches I did six days,' answered Oliver cheerfully; 'but I got off extra light. Many of the men did twenty and twenty-five days right off, and that, too, in midwinter, with freezing water up above the knees.'

'More fools the men to stick it,' growled Rock.

'And what would you have done had you been there?'

'Filled my magazine, an' 'ad one last bu'st at the Boches. If I could ha' killed one or two I'd ha' died 'appy. That's 'ow I'd ha' got out o' water up to my waist.'

'Above the knees, I said.'

'Well, an' ain't the waist above the knees, sir? Any water's bad enough, but trench water's the worst o' all.'

'You'll probably know more about this sort of warfare before the campaign is over.'

'Ah! I dare say I shall find some way to make things comfortable. Any'ow, I'll try an' make the 'Uns opposite me more uncomfortable. But this 'ere ain't sojerin'. It's navvyin', that's what it is; an' I shall very soon get fed up with it.'

He went farther along the trench; but, being an old soldier, he took particular good care to keep his head well down, and run no unnecessary risks.

The trenches were about four feet wide at the top, and from six to eight feet deep. At the bottom they were narrower, as the fire platform, some two feet wide and two high, was cut out of it. The front of the trench was banked up with earth and sand-bags, through which were numerous loopholes, and at the back was more heaped earth, forming the parados, which served to protect the occupants of the trench from the effect of shells exploding behind them.

The trenches were serpentine or zigzag, and at intervals were traverses, or walls of earth, which, in case of a shell falling in the trench, confined the effect of it to only a small portion of the trench, and also served as a protection against enfilade fire. The trenches were boarded, and numerous shelter dugouts had been constructed, these being holes, commonly called 'funk-holes,' dug in the front wall of the trench, and roofed in, and having additional protection against shell-fire.

The majority of the men were off duty, there being sentinels continually standing on the fire-platform, watching with the aid of periscopes the enemy's trenches. In case of an alarm or at the daily 'stand to,' every one manned the fire-platform.

The Wessex were thus variously engaged, when suddenly a screaming overhead was heard, and a high-explosive shell fell with a thud some thirty feet behind the trench. It exploded with a deafening roar, making a great cloud of black smoke. Those on duty continued their work, and in a few minutes across came another huge shell, falling a bit farther

wide. Then several arrived one after another, and it seemed as if the enemy were in grim earnest. So it proved, for the bombardment got heavier and heavier, 'Jack Johnsons,' 'Coal-boxes,' and 'Screaming Sues' dropping round with a frequency that was appalling. The men, with the exception of the sentries, were ordered to shelter in their dugouts, as several casualties had occurred, one shell having fallen right in the trench, causing considerable damage.

As the day wore on the bombardment increased still more, and the officers grew a little nervous as to how their men, fresh out from England, would stand it.

Vivian and the other old soldiers—for any man who has survived for six months the conditions at the front becomes an 'old soldier'—made frequent visits to the few sentries who had to remain on duty; but the gallant fellows, no matter what they thought of the terrible trial to which they were being subjected, were outwardly calm and keenly alert. They had elected to give their lives, if need be, for their country, and when they were put to the test—a severe one for young soldiers—not one was found wanting.

Harris was the only subaltern besides Vivian and Oliver who was in the trench, and Vivian was curious to see how this purely theoretical young man would take it. He found him sitting on the fire-step with his back to the wall of the trench, smoking his pipe and reading from a small pocket edition.

'Hallo, young man!' cried Vivian, 'you seem to be taking it pretty quietly.'

'I've just been all round my sentries,' replied Harris, looking up apologetically.' 'They're all on the alert, and I've had my eye glued to the periscope

till I felt it would grow there. There's nothing very edifying in watching the German shells smashing in among their own dead, so I just thought I'd have ten minutes' smoke and a read.'

'What's the book?'

'One of my old friends, Scott's Lady of the Lake. I'd just got to my very favourite part of my favourite canto, where Roderick Dhu reveals his identity to Fitz-James. You know the words, I dare say. I never read them without feeling a thrill:

Fitz-James was brave:—though to his heart
The life-blood thrilled with sudden start,
He manned himself with dauntless air,
Returned the Chief his haughty stare,
His back against a rock he bore,
And firmly placed his foot before:—
"Come one, come all! this rock shall fly
From its firm base as soon as I."'

'And then he filled his pipe with Chairman, and sat down to enjoy himself while "Jack Johnsons"

dropped all round him-eh?'

Harris looked up in surprise a moment; then, positively blushing, he said, 'I say, old chap, don't pull my leg. I don't pretend to be a warrior. I'm only a would-be scholar in uniform. I'm an admirer of fine language, I think, more than of gallant deeds. I worship Scott for his diction.'

'And emulate the deeds of his heroes.'

'My dear chap, I'll confess to you that I'm in a

veritable funk, and if I could I'd run away.'

'I know the way you sort of fellows run; it's always towards the enemy. If we've many funks like you in the regiment, Harris, we shall have a fine crop of V.C.'s and D.S.O.'s before the war's over;'

and, leaving the plucky sub. all unconscious of his pluck, Vivian returned to his own men.

The Wessex came through the passive ordeal of

The Wessex came through the passive ordeal of enduring a terrific strafing, without being able to fire a shot in return, with flying colours; and when suddenly the bombardment stopped, and the men were warned to man the trenches to meet the inevitable attack, there was fierce joy in their hearts as cut-offs were opened, and it was seen that bayonets were securely fixed.

In a few seconds the Germans were seen scrambling out of their trenches; but they did not advance in that wild rush that characterises the British attack. They seemed to look to right and left as though to assure themselves that Hans and Fritz weren't hanging back, then in an ambling trot they came forward shouting their guttural *Hochs*.

The British held their fire until the enemy had got well out of his trench; then, taking deliberate aim, they opened, picking off the foremost men. The gaps were filled, and on pressed the others, until the British had taken such a toll of them that they came to a stop. The second line, however, caught up with them, and the whole surged forward, while yet a third line was seen pushing up in support. Then the British gave them 'ten rounds rapid,' and the machine-guns got into play. Still the Germans pushed doggedly on until they were stumbling over the corpses of their comrades killed on the previous night. The British wire entanglement had been battered down by the intense bombardment during the day; but, in spite of that, not one of the enemy ever reached the British trenches, the intensity of the fire literally sweeping them away.

The attack ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and the survivors retreated into their trenches, having added some hundred or more to the heaps of dead already cumbering the ground. The whole affair had been madness, just pig-headed German obstinacy, and it had ended in disaster. No sooner had the attack died out than the British artillery opened fire on the enemy's trenches, and for half-an-hour they must have had a terrible time.

'It's a weird thing, this modern war,' said Harris to Oliver when the German attack had ceased. 'It seems to me that, in these days, attacks have no earthly chance of success; and to stand in your trench and shoot down men like this seems a bit cold-blooded.'

'We shall have to face the German fire when we attack,' replied Oliver; 'only we put a bit more go into it.'

'I wonder what I should do if I had to lead an attack over that death-trap,' mused Harris, looking through a loophole at the corpse-strewn 'no man's land.'

'Be first at the enemy's trenches,' replied Oliver.

'I wonder!' again said Harris.

That night the Wiltshires left the trenches, and the remainder of the Wessex came in.

Crawford and Skinner were very much disappointed at not having been in the scrap; but, as Oliver said, their turn would come; there was enough and to spare for all.

On the following day Oliver, Vivian, Crawford, Rock, and several others had to leave the trenches to attend the court-martial on the captured spies.

There were a number of other witnesses, amongst o.H.

them a good many officers who testified to having often seen the dog Bruno in the British trenches. It made itself quite friendly, and would stay for several hours, and then in the darkness jump away out of the trench, sometimes going towards the German lines, sometimes towards the British rear. No one, of course, ever dreamt that the animal was intelligent enough, or had been trained, to be a messenger between the spies and the enemy, but such undoubtedly had been the case.

Amongst the papers which Oliver had found in Mairin's desk were a number of incriminating letters that proved over and over again the guilt of both him, his wife, and their son Philip. They had been in the pay of Germany long before the war, and had doubtless been the cause of dozens, perhaps hundreds, of people having lost their lives. The man Hermann was simply a German agent, resident since the war in Belgium. The Mairins gathered news and communicated it to him, the telephone being but one of the methods used. The dog bore letters to and from the German trenches, and so a regular system of espionage had been established.

Hermann maintained a sullen and impudent silence, but old Mairin, seeing the chains of evidence surely bringing him to his doom, at last gave in and made a full confession; whereupon Hermann cursed him furiously, and would have flown at him and strangled him had the escort not intervened.

Philip—whose wound, though a bad one, was not dangerous—was able to attend the court-martial, and took his place with the others. All were found guilty, the three men being sentenced to be shot, while the old woman and the two servants belonging

to the farmhouse inhabited by Hermann were sentenced to various terms of imprisonment.

The trial lasted two days, and on the day following the promulgation of the death sentence it was duly carried out. The firing-party was drawn from a regiment that had seen some ten months' service at the front, Oliver and Vivian thanking their stars that they had not got to be present. They were doomed to hear all the details, though, for Private Rock made it his business to see the thing through.

'Sech squeamishness,' Rock complained to his young masters, 'I surely don't understand. D'ye think they cared when our lads went down through their dirty spy-tricks? D'ye think they 'd ha' 'esitated to ha' cut our throats in that bloomin' cellar when we arrested 'em? I don't think. And then, oh Lor', they must be tried an' judged as if they was lords an' dukes; an' if they've got to go through it, no one likes to see it or 'ear o' it. Bally rot I calls it; an' whenever there's a dirty spy agoin' to be shot I'm there to see it, 'specially if any of 'em, like that Philip feller, 'as tried to do it on Dick Rock.'

# CHAPTER XIX.

## IN 'PLUG STREET.'

AFTER four days in the trenches, during which time their casualties were very light, the Wessex were moved back in reserve, and put in a good bit of drill, varied by digging and transportwork. Then came another move, and the regiment was ordered to Messines, whither they started next day in pouring rain. They had a very long tramp in heavy marching order across a most difficult country, and under very trying circumstances; but the men stuck cheerfully to their task, and whistled or sang, or played on mouth-organs until they had

only sufficient energy left to plug steadily on.

Vivian looked carefully after his men to see there were no stragglers, and noticed once or twice a young. and handsome lad named Travers, who was clearly distressed, but who was making strenuous efforts to keep up. Travers had, an elder brother in the regiment, both being in the same platoon. There was a good fifteen years difference in their ages; and they were most dissimilar in looks, the younger Travers being fair and slim, of medium height, and a merry, light-hearted youth, while the elder, a quiet, reserved man, was broad, dark, and well over six feet high. Yet between the brothers a deep affection seemed to exist, the elder one watching over the younger more as a father might than as a brother.

Towards the end of the march Vivian noticed that

the elder Travers was carrying his brother's pack and rifle as well as helping the lad along; and presently a comrade was carrying packs and rifles, while the elder brother had the younger one on his back.

'Are you done up, youngster?' asked Vivian kindly.

'I'm all right, sir,' answered the youth in a weary tone. 'I can get along.—Let me down, George.'

'That's all right, Harry; I can manage you; you're only a featherweight,' said the elder. Then to Vivian, 'He's stuck it, sir, till he kept stumbling and falling. His training has been softer than mine. I'll see to him.'

Vivian was touched by this sign of brotherly love. Soon afterwards they arrived at the end of their journey.

In pitch darkness they reached the spot where they had to billet, and the majority of the men, being as cheerful as ever, began cracking jokes about their billets, hoping 'the sheets would be well aired.'

Their cheerfulness met with some reward, for the men already there had prepared for the arrival of the Wessex. Barns, stables, houses, all were made ready for the new-comers; and cheery fires were burning, clean straw to lie on had been provided, and, best of all, a good hot supper, with a tot of rum all round, was waiting for the boys as they came in.

The men already in the village were Regulars, and belonged to a battalion with a glorious history, on whose colours were emblazoned a score of battle honours. They were waiting to give the weary Wessex a cheer as they trudged in, and many a Regular took his Territorial comrade's rifle, and,

placing a hand under the other's arm, cried, 'Come on, chummy; supper's pipin' 'ot, and I've just got a box of fags from 'ome. We'll dry your wet togs round the fire while you doss on the cleanest bit of straw I've seen out 'ere yet;' and the two would go off as though they had been friends all their life.

The Regular officers met the Territorial officers in the same spirit. They were quartered in an old mill,

and had prepared a welcome for the Wessex.

'I like this dry, dusty feeling,' said Oliver as a party of them crossed the mill to the great room at the back used as a dining-room.

'Yes, it will be all right, especially if the flour sticks to us in our drenched state,' said Vivian; 'we shall turn into paste and adhere to all we touch.'

But there was no fear of that. Dry clothes were lent to the officers, and then they all assembled in the warm and well-lighted dining-room, and sat down to a dinner, at which the abundance of the food and the hearty good-fellowship more than made up for lack of variety in the menu. There was some excellent wine, however, and a merry evening was spent, that was remembered in the Wessex for many a day. That is the spirit of comradeship which prevails amongst all branches at the front.

The next night the Wessex reached their final destination. It was getting dusk when they marched through what remained of Ypres, and the picture was one of utter desolation. The gaunt, shattered skeletons of the magnificent old Cloth Hall and the fine Cathedral stood out sharply against the sky; here and there the glow of smouldering embers from fires recently caused by incendiary bombs could be dimly seen. Great shell-holes pitted the streets; of

glass there was none, the houses having been shattered by shells. Many of the shops had shutters up, but the doors had been smashed or ripped down for firewood. But the most awesome thing of all was the silence. No sound was heard but the tramp of feet upon the ashes in the street or the sighing of the wind through the shell-riven houses; and Tommy, curiously sensitive in some ways, hushed his voice, glanced furtively to right and left, and, hurrying on, was heartily glad to be once more clear of Ypres, a veritable City of the Dead.

It was again dark when the Wessex reached the end of their journey, and thankful enough the men were to turn in.

Next morning, bright and sunny once more, away they went to Ploegsteert, which Tommy calls 'Plug Street,' and is proud of, for almost every foot of it has seen fighting. It has been held and paid for with the blood of heroes, who lie in the little cemeteries in the clearings, and after the war it will be one of the most celebrated spots along the whole western front.

'Plug Street' is really a wood, about two miles long by one broad, and is the only bit of woodland along the whole of the then British line.

Oliver and Vivian were marching side by side as they went up to 'Plug Street,' and as neither had been in that district before they looked curiously about them. The country is one of the flattest, wettest, and most monotonous in Flanders. Long lines of poplar-trees stretch as far as the horizon; dikes intersect dikes; red roofs, church spires, mostly battered, and factory chimneys abound; and around, above, beneath is mud, mud!

Two big hills loom up, and away towards La Bassée enormous heaps of black slag rise against the sky—altogether a dull and depressing picture.

'Well,' exclaimed Oliver, 'you and I have seen a good bit of the country round about, Vivian; but I think this bangs all for dullness and general beastliness.'

'Yes,' replied Vivian cheerfully, 'I should say it would take a bit of beating; but, after all, what's the odds so long as you're happy?'

'True, though I should think it would take a real Mark Tapley to be happy in such surroundings.'

'A cross between a colliery, a mud-shoot, and a brickfield,' growled Rock, who was just beside his masters. 'God only knows what sort o' 'eathens the people can be who made such a show, and o' course we must be shoved 'ere. I suppose they 'ad the 'ole British army to choose from; but no reg'ment 'd do except the Wessex.'

'We sha'n't be alone, Rock,' said Oliver.

'Which ain't no consolation to us, sir. Knowin' as another chap's as miserable as you are ain't goin' to make you 'appy, unless perhaps the other chap is more miserable still;' and Rock, as if thinking over this consoling proposition, lapsed into silence.

When they were well in among the trees, which grew thickly, the baldness of the surrounding country was hidden. True, great trunks had been split and riven when struck by shells, and branches were shorn off or chipped by bullets. The ground was boggy, but the numerous dugouts had a comfortable look, and men were busy making 'corduroy' roads, a task at which it was intended the Wessex should assist.

As they passed along, every now and then a big

shell soared by overhead, and frequently a humming buzz betrayed the path of a bullet. No one was hit, though, and the men were beginning to learn how many narrow escapes every one is always getting without being hit, and how near death one can be without being speared by the grisly spectre.

The various avenues in 'Plug Street' were all named, and as they marched along Oliver and Vivian noted with amusement a board nailed to a tree bearing the name 'Haymarket,' and this led to 'Piccadilly Circus.' Presently they passed along the 'Strand,' and on to 'Dead Horse Corner,' near which their work began. This consisted of chopping branches of a certain length and carrying them across to another party, which was making a corduroy paving by nailing these short branches to stouter ones laid parallel to each other at a distance of about three feet, thus forming a very passable and enduring road.

The different parties were smoking and laughing as they worked, certainly making more noise than older troops would have done. Suddenly there was gr-gr, tap-tap, gr-r-r-r, and a machine-gun swept amongst the trees, the bullets cutting great splinters of bark from the trunks, and, alas! dropping two of the Wessex, one with a bullet through his heart, the other with a smashed shoulder.

Instantly every man threw himself flat on the ground until the belt of cartridges was used. When all was silent again they rose once more to their feet.

When Vivian looked round he saw that several men had gathered about the two poor fellows who lay upon the ground. A cry of anguish, heartbreaking in its intensity, broke from one of the group, and Vivian saw the elder Travers on his knees beside one of the prostrate figures. He had raised the head of the poor fellow, and held it against his breast, looking down at the pallid features. 'Harry, Harry, my boy, speak to me!' he cried in agonised tones; and the men standing round turned away, a sob in their throats.

For a minute or so no one spoke; then Vivian approached and saw that the dead soldier was the poor handsome lad, the dark man's brother. He looked at the pale, placid features, and recognised that the lad was beyond all earthly aid. He was dead. 'Bear up, Travers,' he said gently, placing one hand on the big man's shoulder; 'it's the fortune of war.'

'He was my all, sir,' replied Travers mechanically, and now—and now—oh God, he's dead!'

Vivian turned away. Inured as he was to the horrors of war, the agony of spirit of this big, stern-looking man touched his heart.

Oliver and several men with a stretcher came up. These would have lifted the poor lad and carried him away.

But the elder Travers glared savagely at them. 'Don't touch him! Don't touch him!' he said. 'He is mine in death, as he was in life;' and, picking up his dead brother in his powerful arms, he carried him away.

Vivian made a sign to the men not to interfere; and, saddened by the painful incident, they went back to their work.

Presently the elder Travers came back, and, walking up to Vivian, saluted, and said, 'Sir, I must ask

you to excuse me; for a few minutes my mind was unhinged. I will not forget my duty again.'

'My poor fellow,' replied Vivian, taking his hand and pressing it warmly, 'don't say another word about it. You have my heartfelt sympathy in this terrible trial.'

'Thank you, sir; and to-night I should like to bury the boy myself, and then—and then—God grant we may soon get to grips with those devils over there,' and he nodded towards the German lines. He went back to his work, and did not speak another word.

The day passed without further incident, and when their work was over Travers lovingly wrapped his younger brother in a blanket, and, declining all help, dug a grave under a fine old tree.

Vivian said he would read the service over the body, and he and Oliver, with several other officers and men, attended. Travers placed the body in the grave himself, and, after laying a small bunch of flowers on the corpse, stood by while the impressive funeral service was read. The others departed, leaving him to fill in the grave, and went off to snatch a few hours' sleep before the time came for them to recommence their work.

When Vivian passed the spot next morning he saw that a rough wooden cross had been erected, on which was carved:

HARRY TRAVERS, KILLED 30TH JULY 1915.

### CHAPTER XX.

### VIVIAN BAGS A SNIPER.

AT the edge of the belt of trees in 'Plug Street' were the British trenches, and only eighty yards away were the Germans'. Over the desolate shot-and-shell-riven 'no man's land' that ran between the two lines nothing could live for a minute in daylight, and it was only under cover of intense darkness that any one ever ventured upon it.

Though there was no sign of life on the 'no man's land,' or behind the sand-bagged line that marked the trenches, keen eyes were always on the watch, and woe betide the man who offered any part of his body as a mark for more than a few seconds! A bullet from a sniper's rifle was his sure reward.

The Wessex alternated fatigue-work in 'Plug Street' with duty in the trenches, and Oliver and Vivian, a week after the death of young Travers, found themselves watching through periscopes for any sign of life amongst the enemy. Both were good shots, and both had rifles ready laid through loopholes handy to their reach.

The Wessex had lost several good men, partly through their own carelessness; and both Oliver and Vivian were keen on bringing the sniper to book.

There was a corner of the trench where it bent at a sharp angle, and, the parapet having been shot away, sand-bags could not be built up so as to form an efficient protection. In passing this partly undefended corner, a man was visible to the Germans only for a second; but that seemed long enough, and no fewer than three men had been quite recently killed on that spot, which had been named 'Dead Man's Corner.' Curiously enough, all three of the men had been in the front trench only for a few minutes, having come along from the support-trenches on business of various sorts.

For four hours that morning both Oliver and Vivian had been on the watch; and, though several bullets had come humming across, they had not discovered whence the sniper fired.

'That's one of the drawbacks of smokeless powder,' grumbled Vivian; 'there's no doubt we have a good deal more to put up with than our forefathers who fought at Waterloo.'

'Perhaps, though, we have better methods of combating the difficulties, old chap.'

Vivian made no reply, but remained with his eye glued to the periscope.

'Hallo, you fellows!' cried a voice some half-hour later; 'still on the prowl. You put one in mind of the heroes of my boyhood's days—mighty hunters who used to lie in wait for hours with eyes squinting along their rifle-sights, waiting to draw a bead on some stealthy and fearsome animal.'

'If you can find me a more stealthy and fearsome animal than a Hun, Harris,' replied Vivian, 'I'll give you best. But where are you off to?'

'I've got a message for Captain Lindsay from the Colonel.'

'Mind how you pass Dead Man's Corner, then. We've had three accidents there this time in.'

'Oh, I sha'n't show myself for an instant;' and Harris went off.

Bang! and a cry from beside them rang out. Harris had fallen, shot. Oliver and a private ran to his assistance, the private exposing himself for a second or two. Bang! and he fell with a bullet in his brain. Bang! bang! from Vivian, who had never taken his eyes off the German trench; but, giving an exclamation of impatience, he stepped down from the fire-step, and went to see what had happened, taking very good care to stoop down well below the parapet.

Oliver was kneeling beside Harris, with his hand placed over his heart. 'He's got it through the shoulder, Vivian,' he said, 'but whether fatally or not

I can't say.'

'Let's get him away from here; but mind you don't expose your head. What of the man? Who is it?'

'Foster. Poor fellow's dead as a door-nail.'

'Before night he shall be avenged,' said Vivian savagely. 'I think I have now discovered why it is this corner is so unhealthy.'

Word had been passed along for the stretcherbearers, and the dead private and Harris (to whom

first aid had been rendered) were borne away.

Vivian did not go back to his periscope. 'Has it ever struck you, Oliver,' he said, 'that almost all the casualties here occur to men who have just entered the trench, and who are passing farther along on business?

'No, I've never noticed it.'

'Well, it is so; as was the case with Harris. Now, there's no doubt the enemy have some sort of periscope arrangement which gives them a view of

the communication-trench, and that when any one is seen coming along they signal to a sniper who is watching this exposed corner. He covers it with his rifle, calculates how long the person will be in passing along the trench, and, at the first sign, pulls trigger.'

'By Jove! it sounds feasible enough.'

'I saw him for a moment when he fired his second shot, and I marked exactly where he was. I mean to have him this afternoon;' and Vivian at once set about his preparations.

A 'sack was obtained and filled with straw; an officer's tunic was buttoned round it, a sort of head made, and a cap fixed on that. A Sam Browne belt completed the equipment, and a very passable representation of a British officer as seen at a distance of eighty yards was made.

'Part one,' said Vivian, as he and Oliver finished

their task.

'And a good part, too,' said Rock. 'There's some orficers as I've met as was about as much good at their job as this 'ere;' and he contemptuously kicked the dummy.

'You can keep your remarks to yourself, Rock,' said Vivian, 'and get your rifle ready. I think you've told me you were a first-class shot in your

old soldiering days.'

'I was a marksman fourteen years runnin', and I dare say I could 'it a 'aystack at twenty yards now.'

'You're just the man I want, then; come with me.'

They went to Vivian's periscope, and he pointed out a particular spot in the enemy trench, almost opposite Dead Man's Corner. 'Now, fix your eyes on that point just where that extra sand-bag seems almost toppling over. Do you see it?'

'Easy enough,' growled Rock. 'I reckon I don't

want a telescope to spot that.'

'Very well, then. From this loophole you'll keep your eyes on that, and let rip at any one who shows above it, or fire just between that bag and the next when you hear me fire.'

'Right, sir.'

Oliver was also shown the spot, and from a second loophole he covered it with his rifle. Vivian was going to take up his old position when all was ready. A man was required to thrust the dummy out to attract the fire of the German sniper, and Travers asked for that duty.

Vivian was not inclined to grant the request, but

the man begged very hard.

'I will agree only on condition that you do not unnecessarily expose yourself,' said Vivian. 'Remember every life is valuable, and we don't want any thrown away.'

'Don't worry about that, sir,' replied Travers. 'I've got a score to settle with the Huns yet, and I'm not

going under till I've paid it in full.'

'Well, you will impale that dummy on your bayonet, and, when I tell you, thrust it forward till you have drawn a couple of shots,' said Vivian.

This being arranged, Vivian telephoned to the reserve-trench for an officer to come along the communication-trench and to walk along to him, as he wanted to speak to him.

Crawford was sent, and when Vivian saw him

coming he said to Oliver and Rock, 'Now, to your posts.'

When Crawford arrived Vivian said to him, 'Stand beside me, and don't go any farther as you value your life.' He then gave Travers a signal, and the dummy was thrust forward. Immediately from the German trench a shot rang out, but the dummy did not fall; whereupon another shot was heard, and for a second a bearded German showed his head above the crooked sand-bag. Suddenly three spurts of flame flashed from the British trench, the head leapt up, then disappeared.

'I think we've got him,' cried Vivian gleefully.

- 'Keep the dummy there, Travers.'

He did so for another minute; but no more shots came from the German trench, and then the dummy was removed.

'What on earth's the racket?' asked Crawford when it was all over.

Vivian told him.

'I hope you've got the beast, then,' said Crawford.

'I think we have. I'm almost sure I got him; I was dead on him.'

'An' I never made a surer bull in my life,' said Rock. 'Now, if you're done with me, I'll go back to the dugout an' get on with the cookin'.'

'Off you go,' said Vivian; and some half-hour later a couple of stretcher-bearers were seen in rear of the German trenches bearing away a burden.

'We've got him, sure enough,' said Oliver; and during the rest of the day no more firing at Dead Man's Corner took place.

The Brigadier in command of that part of the trenches was very keen upon night patrol work,

a dangerous and often utterly useless proceeding. Listening-posts were established in 'no man's land,' and during the night patrols had to go round. The Huns had a very uncomfortable knack of sending up flares, when the patrol had to fling themselves down on their faces and lie almost without daring to breathe, while the enemy swept the ground with machine-gun fire. Numerous casualties occurred, and very little good ever resulted; but the orders were that it must be done, and so it had to be.

That night Oliver had to take three men and creep along outside the wire entanglements to see that no one was prowling about from the German lines.

It was about 1 A.M., and pitch-dark, when he very quietly scrambled out of the trench and started on his patrol. He had with him Rock, who insisted on being of the party, Travers, and a man named Saunders.

On hands and knees they crept along after the fashion of Red Indians, squeezed under the wire entanglements, and then got upon their feet. Not a word was spoken, of course, and they trod as silently as rubber-soled policemen, their gum-boots \* making no noise on the swampy ground. Suddenly the sound of some one trying to smother a sneeze reached them, and every man stopped, Oliver holding his revolver, and the others their rifles, ready to fire at the slightest alarm.

Immediately afterwards a man almost bumped into Oliver, and a guttural voice cried, 'Wer geht da?'

'Fire!' cried Oliver to his men, and three reports rang out.

<sup>\*</sup> Rubber boots worn over the usual military boots, and coming up to the knee.

By the flash of the explosion fully a dozen armed Germans were seen; they had run right into an enemy patrol. Instantly these threw themselves on the British, and in the darkness a fierce struggle began. It was almost impossible to tell friend from foe, until suddenly a Verrey light went up from the British trench, and then Oliver could see his opponents.

A sergeant lunged at him with his bayonet; but Oliver grasped the muzzle of the rifle and shot the man dead, only to find himself seized by a burly officer, who clapped a revolver to his head. Oliver caught hold of his wrist and twisted his hand aside as the German pressed the trigger, but the weapon was so close that the flash burnt his forehead. Twice more the German fired, and then Rock plunged his bayonet into him. Oliver turned to help the others, and saw Travers surrounded by several of the enemy. The big man seemed like one possessed; he lunged with lightning-like rapidity and great ferocity, and five Germans fell before him. Then Oliver saw Saunders fall, and a man leapt forward to finish him with his bayonet; but Rock smashed the man's head with his rifle-butt, and the other Germans, three only, turned to fly. Three shots brought them down, and Oliver said, 'Now, back to your trench.'

Both British and Germans had watched the fight, but neither fired for fear of hitting their own men. No sooner did the Germans see their side defeated than a dozen shots rang out, and Oliver, Rock, and Travers threw themselves flat on the ground. The vicious rattle of a machine-gun was heard, and for a minute they had to lie perfectly still, cold perspiration

breaking out on Oliver.

The glare of the Verrey light died down, and the darkness seemed more intense than ever.

Oliver whispered, 'We must make a run for it, but we must bring Saunders with us.'

'Leave him to me,' said Travers; and he picked up the wounded man, and ran towards the wire entanglements. Oliver and Rock stayed a little behind to protect him in case they were followed; but they all managed to get under the barbed wire before another flare went up. Then they lay perfectly still till it went out, the wounded man never making a sound. Machine-gun bullets cut up the ground all round them, but no one was hit; and when the flare died down they managed to crawl back to their trenches, dragging the wounded Saunders with them.

Willing hands helped them over the parapet, and Vivian came running up to know if Oliver was hurt.

'No, old chap,' replied Oliver; 'and I believe we wiped out the whole lot of Huns. We stumbled right into them, and should have been mopped up if it hadn't been for Travers. He fought like a fury, and accounted for at least six of them, then carried Saunders out of danger.'

'He ought to be recommended for his bravery.'

'Poor fellow! I'll report the matter to the Colonel. If we could get him a decoration it might cheer him up a bit.'

'I reckon it would cheer 'im up a lot more to bag another brace o' 'Uns,' said Rock. 'I've got as many decorations as most men, an' I don't know as they ever made me very cheerful.' With which remark he went off to his masters' dugout.

## CHAPTER XXI.

#### A SURPRISE VISIT.

TRENCH-WORK, although at times pretty lively, tends to get monotonous, and many were the devices the Wessex resorted to in order to obtain a little variety. Travers's forte was sniping, and he would wait patiently for hours on the chance of bagging a Hun, and when he was successful, as he very often was, for he was a good shot, it seemed to fill him with a sullen sort of satisfaction. But the death of his younger brother had certainly taken all enjoyment out of life for him, and he was quieter and more morose than ever.

It was from one of the other men that Oliver heard why the elder Travers felt his brother's death so acutely. It appeared that they had been left orphans when the younger, Harry, was about five years old. George, the elder, had promised his mother always to look after the boy, and had been almost a father to him, having him well educated, and lavishing all his money as well as his love upon him. Harry had got a bank clerkship, but George was an engineer. They lived, of course, together, and George had devoted his life to his younger brother. When Harry enlisted George did likewise, simply to be with his brother; and when the Germans' shot laid the younger man low he felt he had lost all life held sweet for him.

Harris's wound was a serious one, but not necessarily fatal. He had been sent to a base hospital, and thence would go to England.

'Lucky beggar to get a "blighty" \* so soon, said Skinner.

But Crawford promptly disagreed with him. 'We came out here to smash the Germans,' he said, 'and any man who is prevented from doing that is to be pitied. I don't mind going down in my turn; but I hope I shall have accounted for a few Boches first, and then I shall feel I have not wasted my time.'

The Germans never forgot the punishment they had received from the Wessex on their first arrival in the trenches; and, though the latter were now in quite a different part of the country, so well are the Huns always acquainted with the movements of the British troops that they knew the Wessex were opposite, and opprobrious epithets were often shouted out to them, together with threats of what they meant doing 'one day.'

One of the great annoyances the Boche subjects the British to are 'whiz-bangs,' bombs which he fires from a mortar called a *Minenwerfer*. The British reply with hand-grenades; but the Boche has a bomb weighing about one hundred pounds which he fires over, and which, when it falls in a trench, is a most deadly missile.

Oliver and Vivian were one day sitting in their dugout, which Rock had made a most elaborate affair. There were two mattresses on straw in one corner, chairs, a table, a small and elegant stove, a rug, and even curtains at the aperture which served as a window. A large piece of looking-glass nailed to one side made an excellent mirror, and a solid

<sup>\*</sup> A 'blighty' is what Tommy calls a wound that takes him back to England, and is a corruption of the Hindustani word belahti (home).

mahogany door covered with earth and sand-bags served as a roof.

Whenever he was asked where he got any of the things, Rock replied vaguely, 'Oh, over there,' and jerked his thumb over his shoulder. It is to be feared that the old soldier was a most confirmed looter, and he was suspected of having laid every house within a large radius under contribution. True, the houses were deserted, and that was probably Rock's excuse. Food, too, was always abundant, and chickens, eggs, game, wine, and all sorts of things graced the friends' table.

The other subs. nicknamed Oliver and Vivian's dugout 'The Carlton,' and many a joke was cracked over its elegance.

Private Rock was busying himself laying a very appetising cold collation on the table, polishing the plates with a not over-clean handkerchief, and rubbing the forks on the skirt of his tunic, when a thud came on the roof, followed by a terrific explosion, and a whiz-bang scattered the sand-bags, shattered the roof, and half-buried the occupants under a load of débris. All three within were thrown to the ground, and partly buried in earth and sand. Two other explosions quickly followed, and Oliver and Vivian, half-suffocated, worked furiously to free themselves.

Soon willing hands were at work outside, and they, with Rock, suffering from a cut on the head, were rescued. Several men had been killed, and a feeling of deep resentment filled those in that particular part of the trench.

Oliver and Vivian were both a bit shaken, as was Rock; but Cheery's chief anger was expressed against the Boches who had dared destroy his handiwork.

The three of them were all right in a few hours, and willing hands helped to restore 'The Carlton' to something like its former glory.

Rock worked stolidly and silently; and the next day, as he and Vivian were enjoying a pipe—for on service the barriers of caste disappear, and officer and man are mostly just comrades—the old soldier said, 'Touchin' this 'ere slingin' o' bombs by the Boches, sir, are we a-goin' to take it lyin' down?'

'It all depends whether we happen to be asleep or not, doesn't it, Cheery?'

'You know what I mean. Are we a-goin' to let them sausage-eatin', goose-steppin' rotters do it on us without givin' 'em it back with interest? "Jao, ek dum," as we used to say in India, which, I may explain, means quicker'n a' Afridi'll slit a gullet.'

'I should much like to teach them a lesson; but as we haven't got any trench mortars I don't quite see how it's going to be done.'

'Easy enough. If we can't fire a few dozen bombs at 'em, let us carry 'em there, that 's what I say.'

'By Jove! there may be something in it; but I should have to get permission, and it's risky work trying to surprise the Boches. I've no particular fancy for getting caught out in "no man's land" by a machine-gun.'

'I've got an idea in my old nut as I think'll need a bit o' beatin'.'

'What is it?'

'Afore we came into the ditch this time'—Rock generally spoke of trench duty as 'goin' into the ditch'—'I saw among a whole lot o' muck sent out from 'ome a lot o' pairs o' rubber-soled shoes.'

'Well?'

'With these 'ere on our feet, an' 'alf-a-dozen bombs in our pockets, we ought to be able to give them Boches a pretty handsome strafin'.'

Rock's idea appealed to Vivian's love of adventure. It was pretty dull work just then in the trenches; and, besides, to get one back on Brother Fritz would be a congenial task.

'I'll talk the matter over with Mr Hastings,' said Vivian; and half-an-hour later the three of them were deep in the details of the little expedition. The result was that Rock was sent with a note asking the Colonel's leave; and two hours later he was back again with the required permission, and with a dozen pairs of the said rubber-soled shoes into the bargain.

About midnight Oliver, Vivian, Crawford, Rock, Travers, a man named Wilson (a harum-scarum, light-hearted fellow, the life of the company), another named Bulmer (a gentleman, who was credited with having an income of many hundreds a year), and five others, bareheaded and wearing rubber shoes, with jerseys or cardigan jackets, crept silently out of their trench and crawled stealthily towards the barbed wire.

The night was very dark, and there was a moaning, fitful wind. Each man carried a dozen bombs and his bayonet, and the officers had, besides their revolvers, trench-bayonets—a sort of dagger, a particularly deadly weapon at close quarters.

The whole of the business had been very carefully arranged, and each man knew exactly what he had to do.

The barbed wire in front of the British trenches was successfully negotiated; and, once past that, the

men were counted to see that all were through. Then, lying flat on their stomachs, they began to crawl towards the German trenches, Oliver, Vivian, and Rock in front. Hottentots might have praised the silent way in which they approached, and no accident happened till they were close to the German barbed wire. The voices of the men in the trench were audible, and Vivian heard one Boche tell another that the English pigs were very quiet that night.

Both Oliver and Vivian smiled grimly, and thought to themselves that the Huns would alter their opinion

when the fun began.

Suddenly a stifled cough sounded quite close to them, and every one of the twelve lay motionless. Then very dimly the figure of a man was seen away on their right. He was evidently a sentry thrown out inside the wire entanglements to guard against a surprise.

'Leave him to me,' whispered Rock, and before he

could be stopped he had crawled away.

Breathlessly the others waited, five, ten minutes, but no sound was heard save another smothered cough from the German. His dim outline could still be seen, and Oliver and Vivian, watching him with straining eyes, suddenly saw him sink to the ground. 'Rock has got him,' muttered Oliver. 'It seems

'Rock has got him,' muttered Oliver. 'It seems unsporting to kill a man in cold blood, even though

he is a German.'

'It's unsporting to murder our women and children at home in their beds with Zeppelin bombs,' answered Vivian. 'The Boches have called the tune, and now they must pay the piper.'

Successfully they all managed to pass the German wire, and then they crawled on until the enemy trench

was reached. All was silent except for the tramp of a sentry on the other side of the sand-bags. Waiting until the faint sound of his footsteps showed that he was at the extent of his walk, one by one the little band of Britishers dropped over into the trench.

'Six to the right, six to the left,' said Vivian, and with his party he started along the trench. The sentry was met, grappled with, and Vivian's trench-bayonet took toll of his life. Then on again they went until several Germans were met. Bayonets went to work, but one fellow, scenting danger, yelled out, and seized Crawford round the waist. A fierce struggle ensued. The alarm was now raised, and several shots were fired.

Crawford and his adversary had fallen in the mud, and were struggling fiercely, Vivian and the others being afraid to use their bayonets for fear of hurting Crawford. But suddenly Rock, seeing his opportunity, seized the German by the hair and dragged him partly off Crawford, who was almost choked. Travers's bayonet did the rest, and the six ran forward.

From a big dugout several men were tumbling out, and half-a-dozen bombs concluded their account. Other dugouts were similarly served, and at length they reached a very large one, well lit, and quite elegantly furnished. At a table, on which a pack of cards still lay, five German officers had been sitting playing. Glasses and bottles were on the table.

'Hands up!' cried Vivian as he gazed inside, and up went all the hands. Then one of the Germans, seeing only two or three Englishmen, plucked a revolver from his holster and fired two shots, one of which struck Wilson in the arm.

Instantly Rock hurled a couple of bombs, as did several others. There were half-a-dozen terrific explosions, and the Kaiser was five officers the less.

'If they don't know what "'ands up" means, they can find out what "toes up" is like, growled Rock.

They were then close to a communication trench, and, the alarm having spread, men were heard hurrying along:

'Wait till they're nearer,' cried Vivian, 'then let

'em have the bombs.'

The voices of some scores of men sounded louder, and Vivian cried, 'Now,' whereupon a shower of bombs was hurled, literally blowing the enemy to pieces. The crashing of bombs on their left proved that Oliver and his men were also at work, and the enemy, thinking it was an attack in force, were for the moment panic-stricken.

The time to retreat had come, and Vivian gave three loud blasts on his whistle, which were answered by Oliver.

'Now, back for your lives, boys!' cried Vivian.

On their way a machine-gun was bombed and destroyed; then they clambered out of the German trench. They had to wait a minute for Oliver, who came along reporting one man killed, but with him he had a German non-commissioned officer as prisoner.

'He fell on his knees and howled for mercy,' explained Oliver, 'and I hadn't the heart to kill him.'

'Quite right; let's play the game,' said Vivian. 'But now skip off to our trenches, and take Wilson with you; he's got a "pill" in the arm.—And you go too, Crawford.'

They went off; but the delay, short though it was, had proved almost fatal. Some half-dozen Boches, realising that it was only a raid by a few Britishers, had rushed back to their front-trench, mounted a machine-gun on the parapet, and were hooking on a belt of cartridges. Travers, with a sullen growl, dashed at them, and with bomb and bayonet accounted for two. He was, however, attacked by two more, and while they were struggling the machine-gun spurted out a stream of bullets; whereupon Rock dashed up, and with two splendidly aimed bombs smashed the gun and killed the man working it. The other Germans dropped back into their trench, and the British raced off. They tore their clothes to ribbons passing the German barbed wire, and were hardly clear of it when up went several German flares, lighting the scene as clear as day.

Bullets whizzed round the adventurous Britishers, but they reached and passed their own barbed wire, and then two British machine-guns opened fire on the German trenches, and not a man dared show his head.

The men, when they heard of the success of the expedition, were wild with delight, and gave a mighty cheer, which was replied to by a howl from the Boche trenches.

'By gum, old man!' said Crawford, as ten minutes later he was drinking a cup of tea in 'The Carlton,' that was some strafe. I guess the Boches will pepper us to-morrow for it; but we've certainly got the best of the deal so far. One killed, one wounded, and myself considerably frightened, against how many Huns would you say?'

'We must have accounted for at least thirty,' said Oliver, whose experience had been very similar to Vivian's.

'Put it down at fifty knocked out, all told,' said that officer.

'Not bad,' chimed in Rock, who was actually grinning; 'we've paid 'em for knockin' our 'otel to

bits, any'ow.'

'And that reminds me that in all probability I owe you my life, Rock,' said Crawford. 'I am obliged to you now, and hope some day to repay the debt more effectually;' and he shook the old soldier's hand.

'Oh, it's nothin',' replied Rock airily. 'I've saved dozens o' lives in my time. Why, up in the North-

west'-

'But that's another story, as Kipling says,' interrupted Vivian, who knew the length of some of the old man's yarns, the accuracy of which was, to say the least, doubtful.

'True, sir; an' I may manage to keep you awake with it one night when you're on duty an' inclined to go to sleep. I've had to do that afore now to

some as is colonels an' generals to-day.'

Crawford's prediction was quite right. The Germans gave the Wessex two hours' severe bombardment the next day; but when it was finished a board was hoisted from the trench, on which Vivian had chalked in German:

'No luck this time.
When are you going to pay us a visit?'

The board was immediately riddled with bullets, which fact only elicited another cheer from the British.

'I think, Oliver,' said Vivian, 'that this time we've scored decisively off Brother Fritz. He dislikes being killed; he hates being starved; but what gets his rag really out, what he loathes above everything else, is being ridiculed and laughed at.'

'Serve the beast right!' said Oliver. 'He set out on this campaign with a very swollen head. By degrees the swelling has been reduced, and by the time we and our Allies have done with him, in my opinion he won't have any head at all to speak of.'

## CHAPTER XXII.

#### THE STORM-CLOUDS GATHER.

VIVIAN and Oliver were sitting together in a ruined cottage, through the doorless aperture of which the wind blew freely, while the rain came in unchecked through the holes in the roof.

'So we're going to make another move, are we, Oliver?' remarked Vivian, as he lit an Abdulla

Virginia.

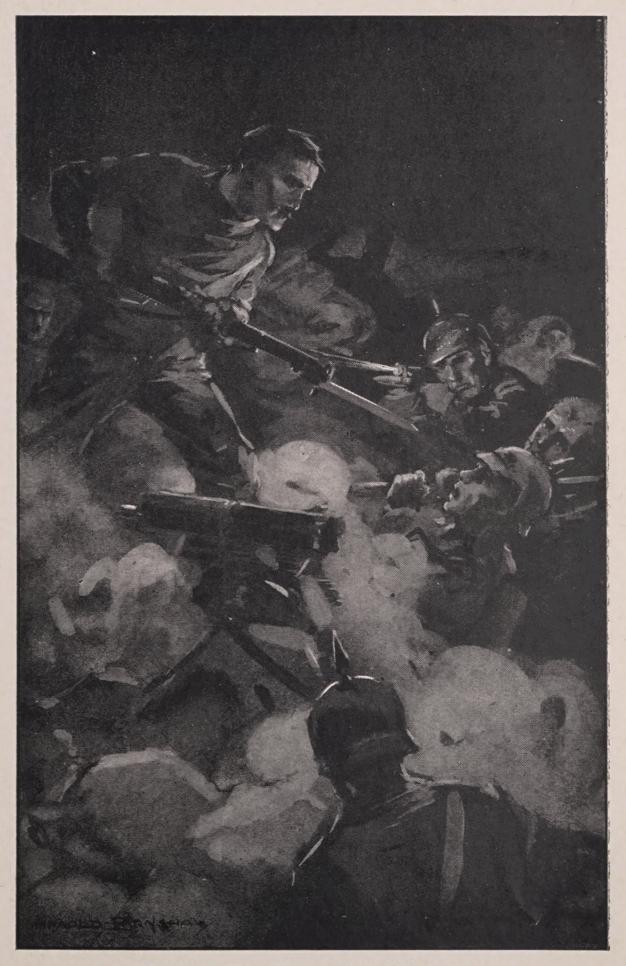
'Yes; the pater whispered it in confidence to me when I saw him half-an-hour ago. Of course, mum's the word.'

'Mummer than an oyster, Noll. I, for one, shall be glad to get on the move again, for this underground warfare does not appeal to me one little bit.'

'Nor to any of us, I think. The retreat from Mons was pretty hot work, but we were out in the open and on the move. Though outnumbered, we could see what we were doing, and, if we were hit, we at least hit back.'

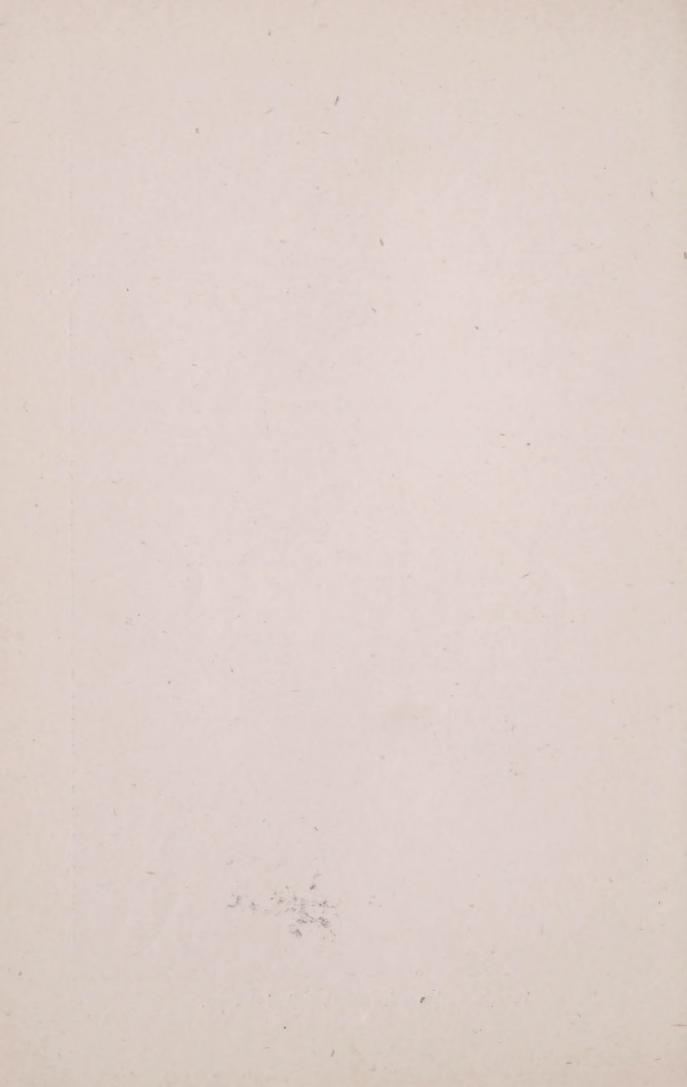
'True for you, my boy; and the sooner we go once more for the Boches in the open the better I shall be pleased. There's something in the wind, sure enough, for troops have been coming out by the thousand, and we are now as well supplied with heavy artillery as is Brother Fritz.'

Vivian spoke truly, and it was a fact that the enemy liked little enough. It was time, too, that something was attempted on the western front, for



Travers, with a sullen growl, dashed at them.

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since the battle of Neuve Chapelle the position had resolved itself into one almost of stalemate, and affairs with the Allies on the other fronts had gone none too well.

Przemysl, which the Russians had captured in March, had been retaken by the Germans and Austrians in June. The enemy had followed up this success by recapturing Lemberg, forcing the Vistula, and taking Warsaw, driving back the Russians with enormous losses. Then came the capture of Brest, Litowsk, and Grodno, as a consequence of which the Grand Duke Nicholas had been transferred to the command in the Caucasus, and the Czar himself had taken supreme command of the Russian armies.

Our Ally was in a bad way, and it was becoming imperative to create a diversion on the western front

to relieve the pressure on Russia.

British and French forces had landed at Gallipoli in the hope of forcing the Dardanelles. The landing had been a most gallant affair, and it had been followed by terrific fighting. But blunders had been made, the results had been incommensurate with the losses of the Allies, and military men began to doubt the possibility of making any permanent success there. Great Britain was beginning to realise that the whole expedition was a mistake.

The French on the western front, like the British, had been marking time, doing little more than holding the enemy; one of the reasons for their inactivity being shortage of shells, munitions having to be sent to Russia on account of one of her chief arsenals having been destroyed, it was suspected through German treachery.

The Italians had declared war on Austria; but o.H.

beyond keeping a certain number of Austrians on the Isonzo front, the event had little effect upon the war on the other fronts.

German piracy upon the high seas had continued, and there had been frequent Zeppelin raids on England, so that the outlook was not bright.

The latest menace to the Allies was the treachery of Bulgaria to Russia, and the former country's imminent entry into the war on the side of Germany; while Greece's attitude was clearly one of uncertainty with the obvious intention of joining in on whichever side seemed likely to be the winner. Hence it was high time that action against the enemy on the western front was taken.

As Vivian had truly said, heavy reinforcements had been rapidly sent out from England, and guns, particularly eighteen and sixty pounders and 4.7's, had been hurried out until our artillery was at least equal to the German.

For some weeks the German lines had been subjected to heavy bombardments both by the French and the British, so that Tommy was well aware that 'something was on.'

On the day following the conversation between Oliver and Vivian, the Wessex were marched some miles behind the firing-line, and, to the men's great amusement, loaded up in motor-omnibuses and driven away west.

On their journey they passed close to Neuve Chapelle, which both Oliver and Vivian had such good cause to remember, and they had to retail to Crawford and one or two others their experiences in that sanguinary struggle.

It was dark when they reached their destination;

but the roar of the guns showed them that they had arrived at a pretty active part of the lines. There was a big concentration of troops, and the commissariat was taxed to supply them with food. Bully-beef and biscuit were the only things obtainable, and there was no chance of brewing a cheery cup of tea. The night was dark and bitterly cold, and the troops had to make the best of bivouacking on the bare ground.

'This 'ere campaign is more like a bloomin' tour o' Europe than anythin' else,' grumbled Rock; 'always on the trek, an' each move one degree more 'orrible than the last. Strikes me we'll find ourselves at the North Pole at last.'

'We must be in a bad state, Cheery, if you can't discover some way of adding to the menu,' said Oliver. 'Never mind; I dare say the Boches are worse off than we are.'

'They'll be still worse off if I get a chance o' oppin' in amongst 'em with a bayonet,' said Rock. 'Any'ow, this is all there is to eat, salt 'orse an' dog-biscuit, an' may you be able to digest it. Ditch-water to wash it down with is chucked in gratis.'

The next day the fury of the British bombardment increased; troops kept arriving, large reserves of ammunition were brought up, dressing-stations established, gas-masks inspected, and everything showed that a big offensive was imminent. After weeks of trench-work the men were in high spirits, and all that the Wessex hoped for was that they might be in the attacking line and not the supports.

The country in which the Wessex found themselves was as muddy as 'Plug Street,' and much more filthy, the mud being mixed with coal-dust, as the whole

district is dotted with coal-mines and factories. So far as scenery was concerned, Rock had ample cause for his assertion that each new station was 'more 'orrible than the last.'

Oliver and Vivian, in a brief pause from work, were standing on a small rise looking round at the country, when a motor-car came snorting along.

They stood aside to let it pass without noticing the occupant, but it pulled up with a grating noise, and a voice cried out, 'Hastings and Drummond, as I'm a living sinner!'

They looked at the occupant of the car, whose red face was wreathed in smiles.

'Terence Dwyer!' said Oliver, and in a moment he and Vivian were heartily shaking hands with the artillery major, with whom in the early part of the war they had gone through so many thrilling adventures.

'This is a pleasure, boys,' said Dwyer. 'I often wondered what had become of you. I've never heard a word since I saw your names amongst the recipients of the Military Cross, on which I offer you my sincere congratulations. I began to think you were incapacitated for further service.'

'We don't look much like that, do we?' asked Vivian with a smile.

'Faith! I never saw either of you looking better. And you're just here in the right place, for we're going to give the Boche such a shaking up, I hope, that he'll be anxious to get back across the Rhine.'

'We're wondering what the plan is, and trying to get some idea of the lie of the land,' said Oliver.

'I've been here for weeks, and can give you an inkling of our plan; but what I tell you must be entirely between ourselves as old comrades.'

'Of course; you know by this time that we're as close as oysters.'

'Just jump up here on the car, then, and take your glasses. Now there, just visible on your left, is La Bassée; two miles this way is Haisnes; another two, and that small village is Hulluch; the town almost opposite us is Loos, and away on our right is Lens. The German trenches—formidable ones, I can tell you, eight or nine feet deep, cemented and floored, and simply plastered with machine-guns—run along in front of those places.'

'A tough job to shift those holding them, I should

say,' remarked Oliver.

'An impossible one, my boy, for you infantry men alone,' replied Dwyer, 'and that's where the artillery comes in. We gunners are, hour by hour, smashing the German lines up, and when your time comes to advance you'll have a walk over.'

'H'm!' said Vivian, 'I've remarked the optimism

of you gunners before.'

'This time it's all right. See those two great slag-heaps on our right front?'

'Yes.'

'They're known as the Double Crassier; they simply bristle with machine-guns and mitrailleuses. The job of taking them will be entrusted to the 47th Division.'

'That's ours,' said Oliver.

'You're in luck, then,' remarked Dwyer, 'for you'll be in the thick of it. Having taken the Double Crassier, you'll wheel to your left, carry the church-yard, capture Loos, and take that hill over there—Hill 70 it is called. Do you see it?'

'Yes,' said Oliver.

'It's a pretty enough programme,' commented Vivian. 'What do we do when we've got Hill 70, may I ask?'

'That we shall see,' replied Dwyer, smiling.
'I hope we shall,' grinned Oliver; 'but, judging from previous experiences, I expect a good many of us will be beyond seeing anything before Hill 70 is reached.

Dwyer shrugged his shoulders. 'War is war, boys,' he said. 'I've been behind the scenes a bit this time, and I can tell you no stone has been left unturned to make this a real success. Every yard of. the ground has been reconnoitred; each company com-mander will have a plan of the ground in front of mander will have a plan of the ground in front of him, with every ditch, every hedge, and every building marked on it. There will be thirty thousand cavalry and horse artillery ready to swoop down on the Huns if we get a real success, and we hope big things will happen. The idea is to sweep on, take Lens and the northern end of the Vimy heights, and get access to the plain of the Scheldt. If we once get Brother Fritz out there in the open, he won't have time to pack his kit or go goose-stepping back to the Rhine. He'll get, and quickly, too!'

'It sounds promising,' said Vivian; 'let's hope it will work out all right. And now, where are you off

will work out all right. And now, where are you off to, Dwyer?'

'Back to my guns. I've been over to see my Brigadier, and the final arrangements are all made. To-night you'll hear a racket, for we're going to give the Huns a surprise packet of high explosives. This time we've got the guns, and Fritz is going to find it out.'

The cheery Irishman reseated himself in the car,

and, after a hearty handshake, went off on his way as happy as a sandboy.

'Upon my word, Dwyer is like a tonic,' said Vivian as he and Oliver returned to their platoon; 'he positively revels in the idea of the coming scrap.'

'He's gloriously optimistic,' said Oliver; 'and, after

all, that's half the battle.'

That night the Wessex went off to their allotted place in the trenches. A perfectly appalling bombardment from the British guns was proceeding, to which the Germans replied only faintly. The night was dark, and the roads were crowded. Ammunition lorries, Red Cross vehicles, staff-officers' cars, motorcycles, were all pressing forward. Load after load of lyddite was being pushed up towards the gun-pits, and it filled the old soldiers—who in the early part of the war had had to face the hell of the German bombardments unanswered—with fierce joy.

The infantry had to squeeze up on the side of the road to let the vehicles pass, and Rock kept up a

never-ceasing grumble.

'If they don't get us all into a bally muck, my name ain't Rock,' he said. 'Trust the brass hats for muddlin' everythin'. We shall want a week to sort ourselves out after this.'

But in spite of his prognostications, in spite of the shells which occasionally fell amongst them, taking their toll of life, they at last found themselves in the trenches, and proceeded to get an hour's sleep before dawn, for none knew whether the next morning would not see the great and long-expected attack made.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

#### THE BATTLE OPENS.

THE dawn broke damp and chilly. As soon as the light began to show in the east the men—who had, as usual, been standing to their arms for an hour—peeped over the parapets or stared through periscopes.

'Blow me,' said Rock to Oliver, 'if we ain't got back to England again! Why, what's that there—the Tower Bridge, or the Crystal Palace, or

what?'

Oliver looked in the direction Rock pointed, and saw two great towers of steel girders, some three hundred feet high, joined by a bridge towards the top, and having apparently another stage some half-way up. It looked indeed like the Tower Bridge, and was immediately so named by the troops.

'I suppose it's some part of the machinery connected with the mines,' said Oliver. 'In any case, it affords a splendid lookout station for the enemy.'

As the day got lighter, the Tower Bridge seemed to loom larger and to dominate the scenery; but it was no longer safe to look at it, for the German snipers got busy, and the platoon commanders forbade any man to expose so much as a finger.

The British and the German trenches were about five hundred yards apart, and on the 'no man's land' grass and weedy cabbages grew on the chalky

soil.

'Bad ground to advance over, Vivian,' said Oliver. 'We shall pay a price, I expect, when we get the order, "Over the parapet!"'

'All depends on how well Dwyer and his men have done their work, old boy. Anyway, cross the

ground we will.'

The division to which the Wessex were attached was on the extreme right of the line, and consisted entirely of Territorial troops. Behind them was a cavalry division, and high hopes were entertained that if the infantry attack succeeded the horsemen might do great things.

During the day a terrific cannonade was maintained. The shells made a continual moaning as they flew overhead, and the noise of their explosion was like one long continuous roll of thunder. Thousands upon thousands of shells, with intervals of only a few seconds, pounded away at the enemy's wire entanglements, smashed his sand-bagged parapets, crashed into the quarries and slag-heaps, blew to pieces cottages and factories, and tore down the woods and villages that formed his position. The Germans were getting a taste of what the British had had to endure in the early stages of the war! Over all, aeroplanes continually darted about, directing the fire; and during the day several air encounters took place, in every one of which the Germans were worsted.

The weather was misty and wet, and the trenches became sloppy and muddy, while the roads were slippery; but all day the preparations were pushed forward, and it became known that the British were going to use gas and smoke in their attack, and were waiting only for a favourable wind.

The next day the wind changed, and the officers were warned for the attack. At 4 A.M. on Saturday morning the watches of the officers taking part in the attack were synchronised, in order that complete unison of movements might be obtained, and the final instructions were issued.

During the whole night shrapnel and machineguns played ceaselessly on the German lines to prevent the enemy repairing the breaches in his entanglements and parapets under cover of darkness.

Soon after 4 A.M. Colonel Hastings had assembled his platoon officers and given them his final instructions. 'Remember, gentlemen,' he said, 'at 6.30 A.M. to the moment we leave the trenches and charge the German lines. Let the officers be the first over the parapets. Stop for nothing, and as long as there is one of you on your feet, go forward. The men will follow you, never fear!'

Oliver and Vivian went among their platoon to see how the men were taking it. Two were playing on mouth-organs; several were asleep; and one man, by the light of a lantern, was actually polishing the blade of his bayonet. Several were carefully oiling and cleansing their rifles in order to make sure they wouldn't fail in the hour of need; but not one man looked or felt the least bit dismayed. Cheerfulness, confidence, and calm resolution was the universal feeling.

The bombers were ready, and positively anxious to get to work. Many had not yet had an opportunity of testing the value of their novel weapons, and, as one man said, they were anxious to see the effect of them on the Boches.

Oliver and Vivian were ready too. Each had a

bag of bombs, and a rifle and bayonet slung over his shoulder. There was nothing to distinguish them from the men; they were as dirty and as muddy, and their equipment was practically the same. The platoon no longer depended on its officer to keep it together; every man knew what he had to do, and was determined to do it.\*

At 4.35 A.M. the British guns concentrated their fire, and rained a perfect tornado of shells on the German positions. The flashes of the guns gave a continuous light; the ground shook as though torn by an earthquake; the air was riven and torn; but the British sheltered in their trenches, and hugged themselves to think that at last the enemy was getting a well-deserved punishment.

At 5.30 A.M., in the faint light of early dawn, clouds of gas and smoke issued from the British trenches and were wafted toward the enemy. This gas was not poisonous chlorine, the diabolical sort used by the Germans, that caused our men to expire in untold agonies, but simply a stupefying gas that would asphyxiate them and prevent them offering any resistance.

The British were ordered to don their smokehelmets, but not to draw them over their faces until five minutes before the attack.

At 6.30 A.M., to the moment, the British fire ceased, and the dead silence for an instant was more awe-some than the noise had been.

'Now, lads, forward!' cried Oliver, as he clambered

\*In the present war infantry officers do not carry swords. Revolvers and some bombs, or else a rifle and bayonet, are found much more useful. In clambering out of the trenches or in squeezing through barbed wire, a sword-scabbard would be a great impediment.

over the parapet, side by side with Vivian; but, quick as they were, Colonel Hastings was before them.

In three seconds the men were out of the trench, looking in their gas-masks like a troop of demons from the underworld. They were hidden from the enemy by the clouds of gas and smoke which had been projected from the British trenches, and they raced forward blindly, having apparently no objective. They advanced in silence, too, for there was no enemy visible at whom to hurl defiance.

Presently, through the smoke-cloud in front of them, bullets in thousands began to cut, and the hoarse rattle of machine-guns told them they were near to the enemy. Men fell, bowling over and over or spinning round as they were hit; but the Wessex, setting their teeth under their gas-masks, raced on, and, suddenly penetrating the smoke-cloud, saw that they were opposite the great slag-heaps of the Double Crassier.

No sooner did they come into view than the fire from rifles and machine-guns was trebled; for, in spite of the heavy bombardment, the enemy still held on to the slag-heaps.

Colonel Hastings, well ahead, turned and waved his stick; he was prevented by his gas-mask from shouting out. The men understood, and, just as the British guns behind reopened at longer range, dashed at the foremost trench with the bayonet.

The defenders, though demoralised by the pounding to which they had been subjected by the British guns, and dazed by the smoke, still offered a stout resistance. Caked from head to foot with sticky coaldust and mud, they looked like demons as the British swarmed over the parapet and went at them. The bombers treated each dugout to a couple of bombs, while their comrades cleared the trench with the bayonet.

Oliver, dropping down into the trench, followed by some half-dozen men, swept along it. A German fired, missed, and next moment fell back with six inches of Oliver's bayonet in his chest. Several other Germans came scrambling out of a dugout, and began firing. A couple of bombs and a rush led by Oliver accounted for them; and then on the Wessex raced along a communication-trench, stabbing, shouting, and bombing till the trench was won.

In ten minutes all resistance at the Double Crassier was over; the defenders were slain or taken prisoners; and the Wessex, winded after their race and fight, in spite of warning took off their gas-helmets and looked about them.

Away on their left the Scottish Borderers, dazed by smoke and gas, had been encouraged to throw off its effect by a piper who had coolly mounted the parapet, and, walking up and down, had roused his comrades to a mad degree with the strains of 'Highland Laddie.' The Borderers were then sweeping on towards the cemetery and chalk-pits on their front, the piper still playing.\*

The smoke having cleared, Colonel Hastings saw his objective, and, having also removed his mask, cried out, 'Now, boys, we're going to clear the cemetery; let's see whether we can race the Scotsmen for it.'

A wild cheer broke from the Wessex, and through

<sup>\*</sup>This piper, Daniel Laidlaw, of the 7th King's Own Scottish Borderers, was awarded the Victoria Cross for his gallantry on this occasion.

a pitiless machine-gun and rifle fire they raced onward. Men fell on all sides, but the officers encouraged their platoons by word and example. Skinner, of sausage fame, was well in front of his platoon; and Crawford, who could not bring himself to get so far away from the old traditions of the army as to carry a rifle, was wildly waving his arm, yelling out something which, whatever it was, the men could not possibly hear in that tremendous din.

So serious were the losses of the Wessex that Colonel Hastings saw it would be impossible to carry the cemetery with one mad rush. He held up his hand as a signal to stop, and with a further signal dropped his men all flat on the ground, when they opened a hot fire on the church and cemetery.

From behind the walls of the churchyard the Germans kept up a constant fusillade from machineguns, while almost every tombstone shielded a sniper. 'This is a hot corner,' said Oliver to Vivian as they

lay side by side, blazing away like any Tommies.

'Too hot to last,' replied Vivian. 'At the rate they're banging away with their machine-guns they'll soon use up their ammunition, unless they've got an unlimited supply.'

For a couple of minutes a perfectly infernal fusillade was maintained; then the Borderers, who had also been checked, rose to their feet and inclined to their left so as to get on the flank of the enemy.

Waiting until the Germans had turned their fire upon them, Colonel Hastings leapt to his feet. 'Now, Wessex, bombers in front, and then the bayonet.'

The Wessex leapt to their feet and rushed forward. Again the leaden torrent was turned upon them, and men fell in groups. The survivors reached the churchyard wall, however, and a German in front of Vivian lifted his machine-gun on to the top of the wall so as to get a better sweep with it, but a bomb from Oliver blew the man to fragments.

Rock, who had kept close to his masters, gave a cry of satisfaction. 'Let's give 'em a taste o' their own medicine!' he yelled; and, swinging round the gun, he poured a deluge of bullets amongst the tombstones. With the assistance of Oliver and Vivian, all the belts of cartridges were used; and then, leaving the captured gun in the possession of a corporal, forward they went, forcing the enemy steadily backwards.

A sanguinary struggle took place, the fighting being chiefly with bayonets. Here Travers greatly distinguished himself. Towering above most of his comrades, fighting in dead silence, with his jaws set like a vice, he ran from tombstone to tombstone, thrusting and hacking, or smashing in heads with the butt of his rifle until his face, hands, and uniform were splashed all over with blood. He looked a terrible figure, and the Germans seemed to hold him in awe and avoid him.

Gradually the enemy was driven back, until the survivors took refuge in the church, and the Wessex and the Borderers closed in on them.

'There'll be nae need tae stick them,' cried out a Scottish Borderer; 'we'll jist shoot them frae the windows;' and the Wessex acted on the hint, pouring in a fierce fire upon them.

Crawford, however, roused to a mad enthusiasm, dashed up to the doors. 'Forward, bombers!' he shouted; 'blow down the doors;' and in five minutes

they were shattered. Butt-ends of rifles finished the work; and then, calling together a dozen men, Rock and Travers being among them, heedless of the firing from the windows, he dashed in with his men and charged the Germans with the bayonet. That was too much for Teuton nerves. In an instant every hand went up, and amidst cries of 'Kamerad!' Kamerad!' three officers and forty-seven men surrendered.

The task of marching them to the rear was entrusted to Skinner; and, after a minute's breathing space, the men were got clear of the cemetery, which they had so gallantly taken, and formed under cover of the dunes that run from Vermelles to Loos.

At that moment a terrific combat was being waged along the whole British front from La Bassée to Lens. The British, determined to break through, were attacking with the utmost bravery; the Germans, realising what they had to lose, were resisting stubbornly. So far, in the particular part of the line in which were the Wessex, success had crowned their efforts, but the cost had been great. Only part of their work was done, though. To the 47th Division was entrusted the task of capturing Loos, and units of the Wessex, Camerons, Middlesex, Warwicks, and Berkshires formed and advanced steadily towards Loos and Hill 70, which they determined to take or die in the attempt.

News came that the left brigade of the division had been hung up by barbed wire, and had made but little progress. This, however, only made the leaders of the right brigade more determined to succeed; and, under a heavy fire, the Wessex moved forward again to the assault.

# CHAPTER XXIV.

### THE CAPTURE OF LOOS.

THE British artillery had done its work well in that particular section of the line. The barbed wire had been completely swept away, and when the attacking forces came under fire from the front-line German trenches the volume of it showed that they could not be very strongly held.

The Wessex advanced in extended order. 'Every man for himself!' cried Colonel Hastings; 'and don't forget what I have taught you. Take advantage of every bit of cover; and, when the final rush comes, keep a cartridge in your rifle in case of emergency.'

There was no artillery-fire to support the attackers, so there was nothing for it but to rush straight ahead, and not to stop until the German trenches were reached. It was an advance that tried the mettle of the hardiest, for the ground, blown into great holes by the shells, pitted with mine-craters, and encumbered with broken war-material, was swept by rifle and machine-gun fire.

The bombers, each with his two bags of bombs, went ahead, and when they got within throwing distance they reduced the volume of the German fire considerably. It was a grim sight as the rocket bombs, with their webbing tails, fell in their dozens just over the gray sand-bags, exploding with vivid flashes and terrific bangs. The assaulting infantry were close on the heels of the bombers, and, did one

О.Н.

fall wounded or dead, his bombs were immediately picked up and thrown by some comrade, for all had been trained. Soon they were in amongst the shattered wire, which had been almost entirely blown away; then a dozen or so more paces and the sand-

bagged parapet was reached.

In an instant Oliver found himself lying on the top of some bags, thrusting down viciously with his bayonet at two grinning-faced Boches who were firing up wildly. In his endeavour to reach one fellow he overbalanced and toppled into the trench almost on top of the two Germans. Instantly one shortened his bayonet to plunge it into Oliver's body, when Rock's rifle-butt smashed in the fellow's head. Next instant Oliver was again on his feet, and the second German was dead, with a bullet in his brain.

Some of the Warwicks came charging up over the parapet, and, mixing with the Wessex, pushed along the trench. Bombers and bayonet-fighters worked in pairs, and bloody were the combats waged, with scarcely elbow-room in the trenches. The dugouts were elaborate affairs, frequently twenty feet deep. They were boarded in, often whitewashed, lit by electricity from the generating station close by, and warmed by stoves. Tables, chairs, sleeping-bunks, and other comforts were in all of them; while some even boasted pictures, and one a piano!

The stormers, however, gave little heed to these things. As they reached each dugout they shouted, and if the inmates at once came forth with hands up, the while a Tommy with rifle and bayonet 'covered' the exit, good! But if any one fired from the dugout, or if there was no answer, a couple of bombs were hurled in, and there was no more dugout.

Clearing the front-line trenches, the stormers passed along the communication-trenches and on into the second line, which was also carried, and then out again into the open country, and on to the outskirts of Loos, where the great 'Tower Bridge' now looked gigantic, towering up almost directly over their heads.

The victorious advance of the British had shaken the nerve of the enemy; and though the fighting on the outskirts of Loos was very bitter, from the first the Germans began to fall back. The British won their way yard by yard to the great iron structure known as the 'Tower Bridge,' and here a determined stand was made. The Germans held it strongly with machine-guns, and the losses among the British were heavy.

'This will never do!' cried Vivian. 'Where's the Colonel, Oliver?'

'I haven't seen him since we left the churchyard. We'd better get the chaps under cover, and wait for our own machine-guns to come up.'

The men were loath to take cover, but it had become imperative, and they opened a heavy fire on the iron structure, on which were a number of snipers. Presently two machine-guns arrived, and Oliver and Vivian went over to direct their fire. Meanwhile bullets and shells rained mercilessly on the attackers; but they were giving as good as they received. The British machine-guns opened with a rattle, and many a sniper fired his last shot from the 'Tower Bridge.'

Then Colonel Hastings, who had got separated from his column, came along with a party of Camerons and Warwicks and a few men of the Wessex. 'Now, boys, the bayonet!' he cried, and

forward swept the troops, a medley of several regiments. Crawford was well to the front, and away they raced, reached the 'Bridge,' and in five minutes not a living German was on it.

'Thank God you're safe so far!' said the Colonel to Oliver. 'Find Vivian, and get the men away from this Eiffel Tower place as soon as you can. The enemy are almost sure to have mined it, and we shall all be in the air if we stop here.'

The men were ready enough to press on, and away they went. Contrary to the Colonel's expectations, the 'Tower Bridge' did not blow up. Either the Germans never thought they would lose it, or else, in the hope of recovering so valuable a lookout station, they refrained from blowing it up. Anyhow, it remained in the hands of the British.

As the losses of the attackers grew heavier it became more and more difficult to keep units together. They got mixed up, and little knots composed of men of different regiments, each acting under its own officers, followed their own initiative, and pressed forward.

At the entrance to Loos the Germans had erected a formidable barricade, and to have stormed it with the bayonet would have been a very costly endeavour. Guns were telephoned for, and soon a couple of field-pieces arrived. These planted shells with beautiful precision on the barricade, while the machine-guns swept it. It would have been an easy matter to batter down the houses in Loos; but, as it was known that a considerable number of women and children belonging to the place had continued to live there during the German occupation, this could not be done.

A machine-gunner, who was doing splendid work,

suddenly found that his gun had jammed. After one or two ineffectual attempts to repair it in the position he occupied, he coolly shouldered the gun, retired under a terrific fire, sat down upon the ground, and took the weapon to pieces, all the while a mark for hundreds of German rifles. Having adjusted the gun, he returned to his original position, and again opened fire as calmly as though at an ordinary field day, thus emulating the gallant exploit of Private Lynn at the Aisne.\*

Another machine-gun, belonging to the Wessex, got so hot that it was impossible to fire it. The men crowded round, emptied the contents of their waterbottles into the water-chamber, and, when it had sufficiently cooled, recommenced firing.

The German resistance having been largely broken down, the word to charge was given, and English, Scots, and Irish, all mixed together, leapt forward. They reached the barricade, and some dashed at it with the butt-ends of their rifles, while others scrambled over. In five minutes bombs and bayonets had cleared a way, and the British were in Loos.

Then began a scene that it is almost impossible to describe. From street to street, from house to house, the British fought their way. From the houses, from the very cellars, the Germans were dragged out, and if they did not instantly surrender they were bayoneted. To do them justice, it must be admitted that many of them fought to the last, but scores of prisoners fell into the hands of the victors; and, dazed, defeated, and terror-stricken, they were disarmed and passed on to the rear.

Rock was in his element; and, though even in the \* Note B-Private Lynn's Exploit.

thick of the fighting he had an occasional grumble, the value of the old and tried soldier evinced itself at every turn. It had to be a very cute German who could get the better of that old frontier fighter, and he found ways of opening doors and storming houses that astonished the enemy.

Oliver and Vivian kept with him; and Travers, inexorably stern, took toll of the enemy for his loved brother's death. Many a Teuton that day died for his Fatherland in payment of the death of Harry Travers.

Nearly in the centre of Loos was a house somewhat more pretentious than its fellows, and as Oliver and his party came opposite it a smart riflefire was opened from the upper windows.

'More Boches!' cried Rock; 'let's dig 'em out.'

Travers was already at the door, on which he beat savagely with his rifle-butt, while one or two others stood by with bayonet at the charge to reckon with any of the enemy who might decide to rush out and die fighting.

The bullets from the window, however, found several billets among the growing crowd, and angry cries arose. The door, a stout oaken one, defied all efforts to beat it in, and men cried out angrily, 'Burn the place!' 'Smash in the windows!' 'Get up a machine-gun!' and so on. Oliver—who from the opposite side of the street had seen the heads of a good many Germans at the upper window—after sending half-a-dozen shots at them, and narrowly escaping being killed in return, ran across the road. 'A couple of bombs is what we require,' he said; and instantly the cry was taken up: 'Bombs! bombs! Any bombers here?'

A man of the Warwicks replied, 'I've got one I've been keeping as a surprise packet, in case I got into a tight corner.'

'And I've just got two beauties,' said a small, dark-

featured Cameron man.

'Come on, my boys,' said Oliver; 'let them rip, two together, when I say, "Now!" All you others stand back, and keep up a fire on the window.'

'Across the road,' said Vivian; 'we shall get a better

aim there.'

The Warwick and the Cameron drew out the pins from their bombs, and Oliver counted aloud, 'One—two—three—four—five! Now!' and the bombs crashed against the door. They exploded with a tremendous bang almost simultaneously, and the Warwick was knocked down, stunned with a fragment of stone from the step. The door, however, was shattered, and with a whoop of delight the British smashed away the fragments of wood and forced an entrance. As they did so loud cries and screams were heard.

'Hallo, what's this?' cried Vivian.

'We'll soon see,' replied Oliver, and up the stairs he dashed.

Each room was looked into as they went by, but no German was seen. The door of the big room at the top of the house was locked, but the foremost men attacked it furiously with their rifle-butts, whereupon a volley was fired through the door, one man being hit.

'Two can play at that game,' said Rock. 'I'll bet British bullets'll go through wood same as German;' and he fired through the door, his example being

followed by several others.

Then the door was attacked again, and soon broken down. Furniture had been piled in front of it, but with their shoulders the British heaved it away, and, scrambling through, saw quite a dozen Germans, half of them officers, standing at bay in the room.

'Kamerad! Kamerad!' cried one, a mere youth, as he saw the fierce faces of the British. He threw up his hands in token of surrender, when a fat, baldheaded officer shot him dead.

'Brute!' cried Oliver, and he dashed at the Prussian, who, however, parried the bayonet-thrust with his sword, and retired behind another man.

Rock, Vivian, and Travers threw themselves upon the others, who, back to back, made a good stand. The officers had swords and revolvers only, which were not so serviceable as rifles and bayonets, and soon there were only three Germans alive. The room resembled a shambles, pools of blood standing on the floor and the walls being spattered. One young officer, in a fit of madness, suddenly leapt from the window, and was smashed in the street below. The other two, one of whom was the officer who had murdered the young soldier, threw up their hands in token of surrender.

'Save the private!' cried Vivian; 'he has fought fairly;' and at the same time a bayonet-thrust from Rock that did not need repeating paid the brutal Prussian officer for shooting his own countryman.

'What's sauce for the goose is ditto for the gander,' said Rock grimly. 'You don't believe in privates surrenderin', an' I don't believe in orficers 'ands up.'

The private was secured, and the British turned to leave the room, which was not a pretty sight.

As they stamped down the stairs they again heard the cries and shrieks, apparently from the cellars.

'What on earth can it be?' asked Oliver.

Guessing what the question was, the German prisoner replied in his own language, 'The women and children are locked in the cellars. Major Munster said if the house was fired they should die too.'

Hardly were the words out of his mouth before Oliver and several others darted downstairs, and in two minutes nine pale and distraught women and children were liberated from a large cellar. Seeing the British uniforms, they sobbed hysterically, and clung to their rescuers, who carried the children, half-paralysed with fear, out into the street.

Rock was particularly disgusted with one very dirty-looking female who, clinging to him, several times kissed him on both cheeks, raining tears on him, and calling him 'noble rescuer,' 'gallant Englishman,' and 'saviour of Loos.'

'Let's get out o' this 'ere,' he cried; 'I can't stand this slobberin'. Ugh, they 're worse than niggers!'

He went on, but Oliver and Vivian saw that the rescued natives were handed over to some Army Medical Corps men, and the prisoner was placed with a gang of others who were being marched to the rear.

Passing along the street, Oliver and Vivian made for the end where the heaviest sounds of firing were coming from. Turning a corner, they came upon a strange sight. Several wounded British soldiers, amongst whom was a man of the Wessex, were lying on the pavement under the shelter of a house. A young girl, assisted by an orderly of the R.A.M.C., was tending them, when a party of Germans, in

hasty retreat, dashed out of a side street. One fellow stopped, and, levelling his rifle, shot the R.A.M.C. man dead. Then, calling out to his companions, the German ran forward as though to seize the girl. She, however, stooping, took from the haversack of a Highlander, whom she had been tending, two bombs. Releasing the pins, she hurled them at the Germans, several of whom she killed. She then drew a revolver from her belt, and fired at the Huns, who seemed appalled at her heroism. When four of their number had fallen, the others made a rush with their bayonets; but Oliver and Vivian had seen enough to realise what was happening. Actuated by the same impulse, they fired and brought down two Germans, then dashed at two more with the bayonet, while the girl shot yet another with her revolver. Several Tommies at that moment appeared round the corner of the street, and the remaining Germans were in a second laid dead.

'Thank you, messieurs,' said the girl in French,

'Thank you, messieurs,' said the girl in French, as Oliver and Vivian came up. 'You arrived

opportunely.'

The Englishmen were surprised to see that the fair fighter was a handsome girl not more than eighteen years of age. Oliver looked at her so fixedly, and with such evident surprise, that she smiled pleasantly, and said, 'You wonder how I got here. I have been here all through the terrible time the Germans'—and at the mention of them her looks blackened—'have been here. Some of your brave countrymen liberated me, and I was doing what I could to help these poor soldiers'—and as she looked down at the wounded men her face softened again—'when—you saw what happened;'

and she shrugged her shoulders. 'I have learnt to take care of myself in these months.'

'So we saw,' said Vivian gallantly. 'With a nation that owns such daughters, what may we not expect from her sons?'

'Ah, monsieur flatters,' she said with another smile.
'If my countrymen are only as brave and as chivalrous as the English, then the Germans are already
beaten;' and she turned to give one of the wounded
men a drink from a cup which stood upon the
pavement. All this took place amidst the roar of
guns and the rattle of musketry.\*

Oliver and Vivian, saluting the young girl, hurried on to find that the last Germans in Loos were being driven out, and by noon the British were in complete possession of the town. The men had been fighting for nearly six hours, and were both hungry and thirsty. A halt was made for a ration to be eaten, after which they prepared to hold Loos against the counter-attack which experience taught them the Germans would sooner or later launch against them.

<sup>\*</sup> Note C-The Heroine of Loos.

# CHAPTER XXV.

#### CUT OFF FROM HELP.

THE Territorial division was not, however, given the task of holding Loos; they had done so well, shown such dash and determination during the morning, that they were to be honoured by fighting side by side with some of the finest line battalions of the army.

A cavalry brigade, dismounted, was marched into Loos to garrison the town, and the Wessex, with the other Territorials, filled up their pouches, renewed their stock of bombs, readjusted their kit, and, each man carrying a couple of sacks to form earthworks to protect the new position they meant to carry, marched off to the attack of Hill 70, where the battle was still being waged furiously.

There were coal-pits both to the left and the right; and they, together with Hill 70, were very strongly

held by the enemy.

The British artillery had advanced, and a tornado of shell was flung on the hill, smashing redoubts and trenches, and blowing to pieces the wire entanglements with which the enemy so thoroughly defends his positions.

Under cover of the artillery, the infantry advanced to the attack; and though machine-gun and rifle fire was literally rained upon them, by successive rushes they advanced until only a hundred yards lay between them and the hill. The Germans were determined to hold this at all costs, and threw reinforcements forward to defend it. The British artillery, however, played shrapnel upon them, and then with a curtain fire prevented further reinforcements being sent up, while the field batteries scorched and swept the hill.

During this operation the infantry had to lie pressed to the ground; but directly the fire ceased the company officers cried out, 'Bombers to the front!' and they and the supports, leaping to their feet, dashed forward.

'Hot work!' cried Oliver to Rock, as they raced side by side.

'The 'otter the better; it'll be sooner over;' and

away they went over the shell-torn ground.

Colonel Hastings was well in advance, and in three minutes they were at the front-line trenches. These had been so battered that there were few Germans left alive in them; and, leaving these for the supports to deal with, the attackers, crossing the trench on planks brought for the purpose, swept on.

At the second trench tough opposition was met with. Bombs and bayonets went to work, and foot by foot the trenches were captured. Onwards and upwards the gallant Territorials pushed, losing heavily, but never pausing. Scores of deeds of heroism were performed, but passed unnoticed where every man was a hero. Steadily and persistently they pressed on until the crest was reached, and Hill 70 was won. The victorious and elated men gave a rousing cheer, and, without waiting for orders, descended the slope and wheeled to their right towards Cité St Auguste.

Sadly diminished in numbers, but not one whit

dismayed, the Wessex were well in the van. Dorsets, Highlanders, Londoners, and Fusiliers were mixed up with them; but it mattered nothing about regiments; little groups under the platoon leaders kept together, and each tried to outdo the other in dash and bravery.

Cité St Auguste was reached, and again there began a series of hand-to-hand fights with the Germans, who, driven forward by their officers from the neighbourhood of Lens, fought stubbornly and bravely.

From street to street they retired, the British searching each house and killing or making prisoners all who were within.

Oliver dashed into a big house without waiting to see whether he was followed. In a room on the first floor he found himself confronted by nine Germans. Two he immediately shot, when the others, seeing only one enemy, dashed towards him. Oliver stood in the doorway with his bayonet at the charge, and cried out in stentorian tones, 'This way, bombers!' as though he had a dozen men with him. The Germans had conceived a holy horror of those deadly British bombs, and immediately two threw up their hands with the customary cry of 'Kamerad!'

'Up with your hands, the rest of you,' cried Oliver in German, 'or I'll blow you all to bits.'

Down went the weapons; up went their hands. Covering them with his rifle, Oliver said, 'Out into the street,' and the seven men meekly obeyed. When they saw that one man only had captured them they cast vindictive looks at Oliver; but by that time they were in the street, and a score of bayonets bristled round them. They were herded in with the other prisoners, and marched off; and, meeting

Vivian, Oliver told him with a grin what had happened.

'I almost put my foot in it,' he said; 'and if the Boches hadn't been in such a funk there would have

been another vacancy in the company.'

'You ought to be more careful,' replied Vivian. 'For the rest of the day I shall keep my eye on you;

it's no good chucking away your life.'

On they passed, capturing houses right and left, until through sheer paucity of numbers they were brought to a standstill. It was then one o'clock, and the reserves ought to have been up, for the Germans were well on the run, and fresh troops could have pushed forward and carried Lens itself.

'We'll hold on to what we've got,' said Vivian; 'the supports must soon be here, and with luck we'll get the Boches well on the move towards the Rhine.'

Crawford, with Travers and a few others, joined them, but they were too few to advance any farther.

'Take a dozen men and hold that house, Crawford,' said Vivian. 'We'll hold the one on this side. We can thus prevent the Boches getting through again till more of our fellows come up; they can't be long;' and, in a few minutes, between them they occupied the two houses, which they prepared to hold until relieved.

They had hardly left the street five minutes before German troops were seen advancing down it, evidently with the idea of driving out the British.

'We must not let them pass us, Oliver,' said Vivian, 'or we shall be cut off.—Fill your magazines,' he cried to the men, 'and open fire.'

The Germans were within fifty yards of the house before the British made their presence known by pouring forth a regular hail of lead upon them. They wavered a moment; then, taking a lesson from their enemies, and keeping well apart, they ran towards the two houses from which came the fire. The British, however, were all good shots, and the Boches fell fast.

The enemy got up to the houses and endeavoured to force an entrance. Being close in under the windows, they were to a great extent shielded from the British fire, and it was clear that in a few minutes they would be in the house.

'There are no more of them than of us,' said Oliver; 'let's meet them with the bayonet; they're not overfond of cold iron.'

'That's the talk,' growled Rock; 'let's get out at 'em. 'Ang this fightin' in 'oles an' corners!'

Descending the stairs, they formed into a compact body. Oliver then withdrew the bolts, flung wide the door, and after delivering one volley they dashed out. The Tommies gave a wild yell, then closed, and the Germans were hurled back.

Crawford, again copying their example, also led out his men, and the Boches turned and ran; where-upon the British got to work with the rifle, and very few of the enemy left the street alive.

'Hurrah!' cried Crawford; 'that's a lesson for them, anyway.'

Attracted by the firing, several other details from various regiments—amongst them the survivors of a machine-gun detachment with their gun—came trooping into the street; and, joining up with Oliver's party, they were divided between the two houses, forming quite a formidable garrison. The machine-gun was given to Crawford, who mounted it in

an upper room, whence he could sweep the street. Two men were sent back to ask for reinforcements, and the work of putting the houses in a state of defence was continued. The doors were barricaded, loopholes knocked in the walls; earth, hastily dug from the gardens, was piled round the windows; buckets of water to extinguish flames were placed ready; and the ammunition was equally divided.

While they were at work the Germans, seeing that the first fury of the British attack had spent itself, and that the victors were so far unsupported, began a determined counter-attack. Along pretty well the whole length of the line fresh German troops, hurried up to the front, attacked fiercely. The British, on fresh ground, where there had been no time to dig in, had to face a terrific shelling and then furious infantry attacks. The elaborate subterranean constructions of the Germans, which the British had so gallantly taken, had been rendered almost useless by the British artillery, and afforded but little shelter to the present holders. Under a pitiless rain of shells the British were slowly driven back from much of the ground they had captured. Hill 70 fell again into German hands, and the handful of British in Cité St Auguste were cut off, though they knew nothing of the fact. The only thing they did know was that the town was being subjected to a very fierce bombardment; but they held grimly on, expecting every moment to hear the shouts of their comrades advancing to their relief.

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### CHAPTER XXVI.

#### CRAWFORD ACTS UP TO HIS PRINCIPLES.

THE afternoon wore on, and still there was no news of any supporting force. Oliver and Vivian discussed the situation. There was not a sign of a German, with the exception of the bodies of the slain which lay in the street; but the sounds of the fierce struggle raging all round them grew louder, if anything, as the day wore on, and it slowly became

apparent that they were cut off.

We'll talk the matter over with Crawford,' said Oliver; and he and Vivian crossed the street. was unanimously decided that they should find out how matters really stood, and cautiously the three went to the western outskirts of the town, when they found that their suspicions had not been unfounded. The Hulluch-Lens road, which separated them from their own troops, was occupied by the enemy, who was moving artillery along it. The summit of Hill 70, visible away on their right, was also in German hands, for the flashes of the guns showed that they were being fired in the direction of the British lines.

'We're in for it,' said Oliver; 'our attack has been

held up, and we're cut off."

'Our men have been pushed back. Something must have gone wrong with our supports, or else the French attack broke down,' said Vivian.

'The question is, what are we going to do?'

'There can be no question about that,' broke in

Crawford hastily. 'We have the glorious example of Marlborough and Wellington to live up to. We'll hang on to our positions as long as one brick stands or one man lives.'

'Crawford is right,' agreed Vivian. 'We'll get back, tell the men how things are, and give the Boches all the trouble we can before they finish with us.'

One of the things that caused some anxiety was the limited amount of ammunition; and to obviate this the German rifles that lay about were collected, and the men's pouches emptied.

The cartridges were divided between the two houses, and orders given that when the attack came every shot must be made to tell. There were nineteen bombs amongst them, and it was decided that these were to be kept until the last, as they might turn the scale in a tough struggle. The men were informed just how matters stood.

'There are two courses open to us,' explained Vivian. 'We can fight to the last or surrender. You know how Germans treat their prisoners; if they don't murder them outright, they are dragged through the country, beaten, and reviled, and finally penned up in some military camp, where they are starved, ill-treated, and used worse than the vilest criminals.'

'That's enough, sir,' cried a lad of nineteen; 'there's no man here will ever surrender.'

"E'd better not think o' it while I'm around,' said Rock. 'There'll be no 'ands uppin' in my corner, I'll give you my word for it.'

'We all understand, then,' said Vivian. 'Victory

or death !- that is the cry.'

As the evening began to fall there seemed a chance that they would not be attacked, and that under cover of darkness they might be able to draw off and escape through the enemy's lines. But this hope was suddenly dispelled by a strong body of infantry coming down the street, searching each house as they came.

'They're bound to find us,' said Vivian. 'Now, men, take careful aim, and don't fire till I tell you.'

It had been arranged that Crawford was to copy the example of Vivian and Oliver, so that there was no fear of his prematurely betraying their presence.

Nearer the Germans came, and presently they reached the dead bodies of their countrymen who had fallen in the first attack on the house. They callously turned these over. Amongst them lay a dead Highlander, and several of the Germans wantonly stabbed the body with their bayonets as they passed.

'Pick these four men off,' ordered Vivian sternly. 'Fire!' and the four men, with several others, fell dead or wounded.

Loud shouts broke from the Germans, and they fired wildly at the windows of the two houses, from which a biting fire had now been opened. The enemy fell in dozens, but others came swarming down the street, and many began hammering on the doors with their rifle-butts. The British fired fast and true, and the Germans, staggered by the losses they had sustained, broke and sought shelter in the neighbouring houses. Then a machine-gun was brought into the street, and a hurricane of lead poured at the windows.

Vivian ordered the men to lie flat on the floor, and not to attempt to fire. The Germans, thinking they had killed the occupants of the houses, ventured into the street and endeavoured to effect an entrance. Again the British rifles spoke, and the Germans replied. But such was the accuracy of the British fire that once more the Germans retired.

'First trick to us, anyhow!' said Oliver grimly. 'I wonder how the ammunition is holding out.'

This was found to be nearly exhausted, and the men took German rifles and cartridges. For half-anhour there was a cessation of attack, and Crawford signalled across to his friends 'All right!' At the end of that time shells began to fall, and several houses were set on fire. It was then dark, but the flames lit up the street, and everything was as plain as in daylight.

The shelling ceased, and parties of infantry again advanced, determined this time to carry the houses at the point of the bayonet. Fully two hundred men were massed in the street, and, while a hot fire was maintained upon the windows, soldiers threw incendiary bombs into the adjacent buildings and up at the windows of the houses held by the British.

'It's time we brought our bombs into play,' said Oliver; and, on his giving the order, six were hurled amongst the crowd below. Crawford followed suit, and the scene that ensued was ghastly in the extreme. Dozens of Germans were literally blown to pieces, and the others, with wild yells, again retreated.

The defenders had, however, suffered serious losses, and, to make matters worse, the house Oliver and

Vivian were defending had caught fire, and it was

impossible to hold it any longer.

'Let's join Crawford,' said Vivian; and, tearing down the obstacles in front of the street door, they shouted their intention.

Crawford undid his door, and the survivors, now not many in number, ran across, taking their wounded with them. Hardly had they done so than a rumble of wheels was heard, and at the end of the street a light field gun was seen being dragged into position by a dozen gunners.

'This complicates matters,' said Vivian; 'we can't

hold the place against artillery.'

'We can capture the gun, though!' cried Crawford gallantly. 'Better to die in action than remain here and be blown to pieces.'

'But there's the wounded; we can't leave them.'

'There's a back exit from this house which opens into a street behind. Let some of us retire with the wounded and endeavour in the confusion to reach our own lines; the others can charge and capture the gun.'

'I'll do that,' cried Vivian.

'I'm hanged if you do! That's my job,' said Crawford.

Oliver was equally persistent, and it was decided to draw for it. The lot to retreat with the wounded fell to Vivian, who could hardly conceal his chagrin.

By that time the Germans were blazing with the gun at the house Oliver and Vivian had left.

'Our turn will come next,' said Oliver. 'Now the sooner we start the better.'

Vivian, with the wounded, left the house by the rear; the machine-gunner was told to sweep the

street with his gun, and when he ceased firing Crawford and Oliver were to lead a dozen men in a charge up the street to silence the gun.

Behind this piece large numbers of Germans had

gathered watching the effect of the shells.

All being ready, the remainder of the bombs being taken with the party, a shrill whistle was blown as the sign for the machine-gunner to open fire, and a stream of lead poured from the gun. The Germans were astounded, as they had no idea the British had a machine-gun with them. There were only two belts of cartridges, so that the attack had to be pushed on without delay.

The Germans again rushed to shelter, leaving the gun.

'Now, boys,' cried Crawford, 'follow me, shoulder

to shoulder, in the good old English fashion.'

'No; keep apart!' yelled Oliver; but Crawford, wild to be first at the foe, had gone, and Oliver had to race to keep up with him.

The machine-gun cartridges were exhausted, and directly the fire ceased the Germans returned to their gun. Crawford was dashing for it, straight in line with its muzzle.

'Keep to the side of the street,' yelled Oliver; 'they're going to fire!'

But Crawford turned with a smile upon his face, and, waving his revolver, cried, 'British officers never avoid danger. Forward!' and kept straight on.

There followed a blinding flash, a deafening roar, and a dose of grape belched from the gun.

There was no time to see who had fallen. Oliver, Rock, Travers, and several others reached the gun before it could be fired again. In a second the gunners were bayoneted; then a bomb was thrown into the muzzle, half-a-dozen were flung into the houses on either side, and away they started on their return.

A figure in khaki lay in the middle of the road, his head and part of his body literally blown to pieces.

Oliver paused, and gave one look at the high leather boots, the Sam Browne belt, and the revolver still clutched in the hand of the corpse. Alas! there was no chance of identifying it by any other means; but he recognised the small form, and a big sob escaped him. Crawford, 'the General,' gallant little soldier and gentleman, had met a hero's death. Three other men had also been killed by the discharge.

Oliver took Crawford's revolver as a memento, and then raced back to the house. They entered, barred the door, destroyed the machine-gun, and started off by the back exit after Vivian.

The Germans, cowed by the determined resistance of the 'English swine,' seemed inclined to leave it to the rapidly spreading flames to destroy them. Should they be driven forth by the flames, the Germans, hiding in the houses around, were ready to shoot them down, and this could be done with no danger to themselves.

Meanwhile Oliver had joined Vivian, and sorrow-fully told him of Crawford's death.

'We've lost a good chum and the service a gallant officer,' said Vivian sadly. 'Hang it! why didn't I, as his superior, order him to go away with the wounded?'

'He'd have felt slighted if you had,' said Oliver.

'He was touchy about being considered inexperienced.'

'Well, we're not out of the wood yet. We have the men still to think of.'

By the glare of the burning village they were enabled to steer clear of Hill 70; and, keeping that on their right, the flashes from the guns guiding them, they entered a narrow lane. The rain was falling in torrents, and the night was dark. Every one had been practically wet through the whole day, but no one had noticed it.

Leaving the lane, Oliver and his party reached a plain, where they stumbled over dead or dying Germans at almost every step.

'We must be crossing the scene of one of our big attacks,' said Vivian. 'Our position should be somewhere straight in front.'

'Goodness knows where our lines are now!' replied Oliver. 'It depends on how successful the German counter-attack has been.'

At that instant a flare went up, and showed a party of Germans only a few yards away. One of these immediately fired, and Rock gave a muttered cry and seized Oliver's left arm.

'Don't fire; use the bayonet,' cried Oliver; and those who were unburdened rushed at the Germans.

The flare showed the black iron structure of the 'Tower Bridge' looming almost directly on their front, and they knew they were going in the right direction.

The Germans, hearing English spoken, immediately threw up their arms, shouting, 'Kamerad!'

'Confound them! why didn't they fight?' said Oliver, 'What are we going to do with all these

fellows?' In German he cried to the men, 'Throw down your rifles, and take off your side-arms. Any sign of treachery will mean your instant death.'

'Trust us, Herr Officier,' said one of the men. 'We belong to the 126th Saxon Regiment, and are sick of the war. We were making our way over to the English to surrender, and thought you were Germans; that was why we fired.'

'Well, remain where you are for a moment,' said Oliver; 'and, remember, no tricks!'

'We can lead you to the English lines,' said one of the men; 'we know where our own troops are.'

It was found that Rock had been shot through the arm, a painful wound. He vowed vengeance on all Germans while his wound was being dressed. This done, the Germans were made to carry the English wounded, and then they all went silently forward.

In a quarter of an hour they were challenged by a British sentry, and Oliver managed to convince the soldier they were friends. In half-an-hour they were safe within the British lines, the prisoners were handed over, and then, thoroughly exhausted, all sank on the ground and fell asleep.

# CHAPTER XXVII.

### TRAVERS AVENGES HIS BROTHER.

THE few survivors from Cité St Auguste, although their sleep was one of absolute exhaustion, were not allowed to slumber long. The position was serious, and soon after dawn they were aroused. The morning was fine but cold, and the sun shone brilliantly. The scenes in Loos were ghastly. Corpses lay everywhere; operations were being performed upon the wounded amidst bursting shells. Supply and ammunition carts were rumbling in; loads of wounded were going out.

Breakfast, thanks to the magnificent service of the commissariat, was obtainable; after which Oliver learnt that the remainder of the Wessex, with the Highlanders, were holding on to the western slopes of Hill 70. They had a desperate job, but were making

the best of it.

It was known that the British had been hung up by barbed wire in their attack upon Hulluch, and the effort had failed. The French had not been able to attack on the previous day until 1 P.M. instead of at 6.30 A.M., and that had a great deal to do with the checking of the British success.

'Well, our place is with our comrades,' said Vivian, and away the survivors of the Wessex went, Rock

insisting on going with them.

'I can use my right arm, any'ow,' he said; 'an' that's enough for any bloomin' 'Un.'

To Oliver's joy, he found that his father had come through safely so far; and the Colonel was no less delighted to see his son and Vivian safe. The news of Crawford's heroic death caused much sorrow.

'You must write me an official account of the deed, and I'll forward it to the General,' said the Colonel. 'I will try at least to get a D.S.O. for his relations to keep.'

Skinner, who had also come through safely, was much affected. 'First Harris, now Crawford; only me left in a few weeks of our Crowborough class. It makes a chap think.'

But there was little time that day to think. The Germans made a series of most violent attacks, and hour after hour the courage of the troops was tried to the utmost to meet them. Finally arrest them they could not, and gradually the overwhelming hordes of Germans drove the British back foot by foot. The enemy machine-gun fire was terrific, and by noon they had regained Pit 14 bis and the redoubt on Hill 70.

By nightfall the troops had lost no more ground, though their loss in men had been heavy. Still, they had made the enemy pay a big price. Besides his enormous losses in dead and wounded, two thousand six hundred prisoners, nine guns, and a number of machine-guns had been captured, and Loos remained in British hands.

News was also received that the French had captured Souchez and two thousand Germans; so that, as Vivian said, the sun was not shining exclusively for the Boches.

The Wessex had been fighting almost continuously for forty-eight hours, and there seemed no chance of

any relief. They had lost heavily too; but there was no prospect of an exchange from the trenches, and as soon as it was dark they were moved up, nearer to Hulluch.

Irritated by the pain of his wound, Rock was more than usually surly. 'Blest if I don't think it's done o' purpose,' he growled. 'When we might ha' 'ad 'arf-an-hour's nap, oh no, out you come, do a mile's trudge in sludge an' muck up to your neck, an' get into another trench as bad as the one you're leavin', an' shift the other fellows over 'ere.'

'Bear up, Cheery; it won't last for ever,' said Oliver.

'No more shall I, thank God! If I thought I should I'd blow my brains out this moment.'

'Which is a trifle contradictory,' said Oliver, who was feeling quite as much annoyed as Rock, but had to set an example.

They had not been in the new part of the trenches long before Colonel Hastings sought out Oliver and Vivian. 'I know you lads have had a more trying time than the rest of us lately,' he said; 'but I'm going to ask you whether you feel up to making another effort.'

'We're ready as long as we can keep on our feet,' said Vivian. 'What is it, Colonel?'

'Well, the General in command here tells me that about three-quarters of a mile from our front there is an old château which has in some miraculous fashion escaped much of the knocking about by both sides. Now, to-morrow it's expected we shall have to make another advance, and it is very important that we should know whether the enemy are holding the place in numbers, whether it's entrenched, and

what sort of an obstacle it might prove to our advance.'

'Our guns could surely blow it up,' said Oliver.

'Of course; but our people want to know whether the enemy have any trenches in front of it. Our aircraft men are not unanimous about it.'

'It's a case for personal reconnaissance?'

'I think it is; and if any one can successfully discover the facts, you and Vivian are the two. In fact, I've got nobody else I can send.'

'We'll do it,' said Vivian.

'It's a duty fraught with the greatest danger, and I

shall be on tenterhooks while you're away.'

'Oh, we shall be all right. Our knowledge of the language will enable us to fool the Boches if we run across any; and if it should come to a fight, I dare say we shall have our usual luck.'

'Take a man or two with you.'

'I think this job is better undertaken alone.—Don't you, Oliver?'

'Yes, unless we take Rock.'

'You forget his wounded arm.'

'Oh, yes! Then we'll go alone.'

Revolvers, trench-daggers, pocket-torches, and a couple of flarelights constituted all their equipment.

When Rock found his masters were going out on a reconnaissance he announced his intention of accompanying them; and when he was told that on account of his arm he could not, he became almost mutinous. The argument attracted the attention of Travers, who, learning what was afoot, begged to be taken.

'I'm afraid this is a job where a knowledge of the language is necessary,' said Oliver.

'You can keep your ears open, sir,' said Travers, 'and you need not fear me opening my mouth. You have worked with me before, and know I can be trusted.'

'It wouldn't be a bad idea to take him,' whispered Vivian; 'he's a splendid fellow in a corner, and as silent in his work as old Rock himself.'

So, some half-hour later, three figures crept over the parapet and proceeded on all-fours for a hundred yards, till they were so smothered in mud that they were almost indistinguishable from the sea of mud around them.

Rising to their feet, they went along, taking advantage of shell-holes, mine-craters, and bits of scrubby bush.

Owing to the configuration of the ground, the Germans at that particular spot, after being driven from their trenches, had not again dug themselves in in the usual fashion, with trenches extending all along the front, communicating with support-trenches, but had dug pits, which were strongly held by machinegun parties. The pits were not difficult to avoid by a small party, and by crawling along on their stomachs the three passed safely.

Past the rifle-pits they heard Germans talking and moving about, and had but little difficulty in avoiding them. By that time they were such a mass of mud that no one could have said whether their uniform was British or German.

They presently came in sight of the big château, and from the sounds it was clear that there was considerable activity there.

Occasional firing was going on along the British and the German lines, and this was useful in keeping them well informed of their relative position.

The château stood back from the road, and appeared to be surrounded by a strong wall. By making a circuit of the place it was found that there were no trenches. The château had large entrance-gates, just inside which were two lanterns, their light carefully shaded. Their rays, however, revealed the fact that a couple of sentries were keeping guard inside the gates, and, of course, there was no chance of getting into the house by that way. Watching from behind a transport wagon which had been overturned close to the gates, they noticed that a number of men were going in, carrying boxes like ammunition boxes.

'Strange, if they intend holding the place, as the carting in of ammunition implies, that they haven't thrown up any works outside,' whispered Vivian.

'We sha'n't be able to find out much from here,' replied Oliver in the same low tones. 'I wonder whether we could get inside.'

'By Jove! it's a great idea,' said Vivian; and the three crept away from the front of the château to the back, where, sheltering under the wall, they discussed the possibility of success. It was just one of those daring exploits, with apparently little chance of succeeding, which is so dear to the British heart. It is the almost impossibility of success, in most cases, which carries the thing through.

In five minutes the three soldiers had found a scalable place in the wall, had got over, and were in the garden, listening intently for any sound. All being quiet, they crept towards the house, dimly



Vivian grappled with the Prussian, and a fierce struggle began.
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visible in the watery moonlight. The windows of the château were all heavily shuttered or else provided with dark blinds; only very faint rays of light escaped, but the sounds of voices within were quite audible. Also, other sounds, clearly those of pick and shovel, were heard. When the three men crept to the side of the château the sounds got fainter, and it was evident that the work was going on principally at the back of the house.

'There's a door here unlocked,' whispered Travers.
'I tried the handle and it yielded.'

The others turned, and saw that this was so.

'We'll just have a look inside, anyway,' said Vivian.—'Travers, in case we are discovered, don't speak; just leave Mr Hastings and me to bluff a way out. If it comes to fighting, follow our example.'

They passed through the door, along a quite dark passage, up a few steps, then into a fairly well-lighted hall. Crossing this, they saw a small room, which had once been elegantly furnished, but which had suffered greatly at the hands of the Huns. Mud was all over the fine carpet, pictures and mirrors had been wantonly smashed, and the cheery fire burning in the grate seemed to consist largely of picture-frames and chair-legs.

'We shall probably find the officer in command in the best part of the house,' whispered Oliver. 'Let's

peep in.'

The centre of the room, which had evidently been fitted up as a kind of snuggery, was occupied by a round table covered with a heavy damask cloth which reached to the floor. Putting one finger on his lips, Oliver motioned to Travers to hide under the table, which he did.

The small room led to what had once been the library, the door opening from the left. Oliver approached on tiptoe, and, getting behind the door, peeped through the crack.

Voices could be heard in the room; and as Oliver glanced in he saw an officer, a red-faced, obese Prussian

of the worst type, sitting at the table.

A sergeant was putting some tools into a bag; and, having finished, he clicked his heels and saluted. 'There is nothing else, Herr Major?' he said.

'No,' replied the major, puffing a huge cloud of smoke from his mouth; 'go, and send me along

Herr Lieutenant Bebel.'

The man saluted and departed; and Vivian, knowing that he was coming out, had joined Travers under the table. Oliver, gripping his revolver firmly, pressed himself almost flat behind the door, and the sergeant passed without noticing him. Then, creeping as quietly as a mouse, Oliver joined the others under the table, and they waited till the rattle of a sword-scabbard was heard, and some one crossed the cosy little room and entered the library.

'Come in, Bebel,' cried the major's voice; and then

followed the clink of glasses and a bottle.

Oliver and Vivian crawled out, and again hid behind the door.

'Everything is now ready, Bebel,' said the major. 'Kaltschmidt has finished the wiring; in half-an-hour all the explosives will be in position, and everything will be prepared for the reception of our friends the English, if they reach as far as this to-morrow.'

'Good, major!'

'Under that box'—the major pointed to a sidetable on which lay a small wooden box—'are the two ends of the live wires; a small push connects them. One little pressure, and you and I and—how many men have we got here, Bebel?—about four hundred go up so—pouf!' and he made a puffing noise with his mouth.

'Don't talk about it; the idea makes me feel cold.'

'You'll be colder still, Bebel, when you are here by yourself,' guffawed the major.

'Shall I be left?'

'Assuredly. The Engineers are running a wire back to headquarters; when that is done, Kaltschmidt will make a connection from there to our little box. I shall press a button at the moment when the English pigs swarm into the château, and up they go. You have to remain here and see the connection made.'

'Can't Beyer do that, major?'

'No,' replied the major harshly; 'I must have some one on whom I can depend. You know the General; I have his positive orders. But there'll be no danger to you. In two hours' time we withdraw most of our men, and send those Saxon fools to take their place. A few of our own regiment will have to remain as well; and I'll give you a list of names, all those of special friends of mine'—and the major smiled ferociously—'who'll be left. They'll remain to prevent any suspicion. Then, when the English get in, up go the lot.'

'A pretty plan,' said the lieutenant with dry

lips.

'Very! A victory for the Fatherland, Bebel, and a paying off of old debts for me! Now, another glass of wine, and away you go. I shall leave here in half-an-hour.'

The major rose from his chair, took a handsome volume from a shelf, tore out a leaf, relit his cigar, and threw the volume on the fire.

The lieutenant was drinking his glass of wine, when with startling suddenness a shell burst just outside the window.

'Gott im Himmel! what's that?' cried Bebel, and he dashed out into the small room, almost running into Oliver's arms.

'Stop him!' cried Vivian; 'he must not escape.'

Travers came out from under the table and threw himself on the lieutenant, while Vivian darted into the library to deal with the major.

Suspicious, as are all his nation, the Prussian, at the first sound of a scuffle, had snatched up his revolver, and as Vivian sprang toward him, without waiting to ask whether this mud-covered stranger was friend or foe, he fired. The bullet took off Vivian's cap; the second would in all probability have crashed into his brain, but the hammer fell and there was no report; the pistol had contained only one cartridge!

Before the error could be rectified Vivian grappled with the Prussian, and a fierce struggle began. The major shouted for help, but Vivian cried, 'Hold your tongue; I have two companions in the next room, and if you raise any alarm your doom is sealed.'

The Prussian, however, continued to cry out, whereupon Travers came gliding into the room. The major, a bigger and more powerful man than Vivian, was getting the upper hand, when Travers, waiting his opportunity, stabbed him with the naked bayonet he held in his hand. The Prussian's grasp relaxed, his face turned a greeny gray, and after a few convulsive struggles he rolled over lifeless.

'You've probably saved me, Travers, though I'm sorry the beggar's killed. I should have liked to give him a sporting chance for his life.'

'Bah, sir! there's only one way to deal with these

fellows; you must kill them, or they'll kill you.'

'What of the other officer?'

'We've got him safe enough,' said Oliver, who then entered the room. 'I tapped him on the head, and he'll be quiet for some time.'

'I wonder whether the row will bring any one in here,' said Vivian a little anxiously. 'Let's get this fellow out of sight, anyway.'

The major was rolled away under some curtains that hung beneath the bookshelves covering the walls.

'We must secure our friend the lieutenant too,' said Oliver; 'he may come round at any minute.'

Bebel was gagged, his arms and legs tightly secured with the curtain-cords which Vivian tore down, and he, too, was placed under the curtains in the library. While this was being done by Vivian and Travers, Oliver, revolver in hand, stood just inside the door of the small room, ready to tackle any one who might enter. But German officers do not welcome intruders into their quarters every time a pistol-shot may be heard there; and, whether the noise of the scuffle was heard or not, no one came in.

'We must get away quietly,' said Vivian; 'but first we'll have a look round for any papers that may be of use if we get back safely.'

While he was looking at the letters lying on the

table, Oliver examined the two wires in the box on the side-table.

'We learnt that the place is mined, and has been prepared as a trap for our men to-morrow,' he explained to Travers. 'These two wires form the connection. If I were to press this button it would blow the château, ourselves, and some three or four hundred Germans to Kingdom Come. If any of them should get in here before we're clear off, I'm hanged if I wouldn't do it, too, rather than be taken.'

'Four hundred Germans!' said Travers, wetting his lips with his tongue. 'Four hundred at one blow! I could die happy.'

'We'll have them all right,' said Vivian, his search being finished. 'When we get back we can telephone to our batteries, which will drop half-adozen presents from the four-inch, and the château will go up like a rocket.'

'We'd better be getting away too,' said Oliver; 'all seems quiet.'

'Put on these things, Travers,' said Vivian as he took the major's cloak and cap from a chair where they had been thrown. 'Mr Hastings and I may get through, as we speak the language fluently, and in the darkness you may pass for our dead Prussian friend. Anyhow, the cloak and cap would command respect.'

Travers did as he was bid; and then, after pressing their ears to the door, and finding all was quiet, they ventured out. They went along the passage, down the stairs, and safely gained the door leading into the garden.

'Luck favours us,' whispered Oliver gleefully. 'I

feel like a burglar who has just made a successful haul of forks and spoons.'

'How do you know how such a fellow feels?' asked Vivian. 'I shall feel much happier when I'm back in our own lines.'

They crossed the garden, and Oliver and Vivian scaled the wall. Travers was about to follow, when suddenly a starlight went up, lighting up all the surrounding country. A party of Germans, not ten yards away, saw the two British officers on the wall, and one yelled out, 'The enemy! Fire, Ludwig! fire!' and a rifle banged off.

'Hang it, we're done!' cried Oliver. 'They'll give the alarm, and we shall never get back. Our fellows

will fall into the trap after all.'

'No, they won't,' shouted Travers, who had climbed to the top of the wall. 'Run for your lives, gentlemen! In one minute the château and all in it will go into the air. Good-bye, and God bless you both!'

'Come back, Travers! Don't be a fool,' shouted Vivian; and Oliver too cried, 'Come back! We still

have a chance.'

But Travers's footsteps were already heard running across the garden, and Vivian said, 'Good God, Oliver, what shall we do?'

'We can do nothing,' replied Oliver. 'We cannot possibly save him; we had better do as he said.'

The Germans, only one of whom apparently had a rifle, stood as though undecided how to proceed. Acting on a sudden impulse, Oliver cried, 'The ground on which you stand is mined. In one minute the mine will be exploded. Run for your lives.'

The Germans gave a sort of gasp; then one turned

and ran, and the others followed.

'This way, Vivian,' cried Oliver, and they ran off in an opposite direction. They had not gone very far before the whole country was lit up by a blinding flash, there was a roar as of a thousand mortars, and a mighty wind caught up Oliver and Vivian and hurled them to the ground, where they lay half-unconscious for some time. Presently they got on their feet, dazed and shaken. All was quiet and dark.

'Let us get back to our lines,' whispered Oliver; 'that is, if God wills it. We have had a marvellous escape.'

'And Travers has avenged his brother's loss. Noble soul! he died a hero's death.'

'Amen!' said Oliver; and they crept quietly away in the darkness.

# CHAPTER XXVIII.

#### THE GUARDS JOIN IN.

AN hour after Travers had blown the château, himself, and some hundreds of the enemy into the air, Oliver and Vivian—wet to the skin, caked with mud, and utterly exhausted—after several very narrow shaves crawled over the parapet of the British trench. Their escape had been due more to luck than judgment; but the explosion, taking place in rear of their lines, had drawn the attention of the Germans more in that direction than in that of the British, and Oliver and Vivian had managed to slip through.

It was not their own part of the British front that they reached, but they received almost as warm a welcome as they would have got there. They explained the cause of the explosion, which had, of course, been both seen and heard for miles around, and Travers's heroism caused a thrill of pride to vibrate in the hearts of those who heard the story.

The two young officers reached their own lines, and made their report to the Colonel.

'Thank Heaven you are safe!' he said when they had finished. 'When I saw the flash of the explosion I gave you both up for lost. Poor Travers! he has met a hero's death, and will be a great loss to the battalion. But you lads are done up. Something warm to eat, and a change of clothes, are what you really want; but I am afraid these are out of the question.'

'Not where Dick Rock is,' said a voice behind them; and the old soldier, his left arm tied up in a blood-stained towel, stepped out of the darkness. 'If you'd ha' taken me you wouldn't ha' come back in this mess,' he said reprovingly; 'an' I doubt if you'd ha' lost George Travers. Anyway, you can tell me 'ow it all 'appened while you're dryin' yourselves. Come along o' me.'

As an officer's servant Rock was little short of a marvel. He had taken possession of an old dugout, and with the aid of a few planks and a tarpaulin had managed to make it fairly waterproof on top. The mud and refuse had been swept from the floor, a couple of ammunition boxes provided for seats, an oil lantern for illumination, a heap of straw on a few planks in one corner served as a bed, and, best of all, a biscuit-tin, standing on four empty shell-cases, and full of glowing charcoal, diffused a genial heat all over the dugout.

'Upon my word, Rock,' said Oliver, 'you're a

perfect genius!'

'It's taken you some time to find it out,' growled Rock. ''Owsomever, I'm used to ingratitood; never 'ad nothink else all my life.'

Oliver and Vivian dropped down on the straw, and Rock took the lid off a billy that was standing in front of the fire, liberating a most appetising odour.

'By Jove, Cheery! what have you got there?' asked Vivian, sniffing hungrily.

'Mulligatawny soup, boiled mutton an' capers, roast pork, turkey, jugged hare, an' beefsteak-puddin'. Which will you 'ave?'

'Whatever happens to be in the billy;' and in

another couple of minutes Oliver and Vivian were eating an excellent stew made from ration beef and an onion, which Rock had managed to 'borrow' from 'over there.'

While they were eating, the officers related what had happened at the château.

Rock was very silent during the recital, and when it was finished he said in a rather husky voice, 'E oughter come back when you called 'im; no good ever comes o' disobeyin' orders.' Then after a few seconds' pause, 'But, by ——! 'e was a man, an' no braver ever served in the old Fightin' Fifth.'

A tot of rum following the stew, Oliver and Vivian sank down on the straw; and, although heavy firing from both sides went on all night, they

slept soundly.

They did not awake till some time after daybreak, when they jumped up, ashamed at having slept so long. The morning was dull and heavy, and a cold rain was falling in torrents. Heavy artillery firing was going on, the Germans violently attacking Souchez, in order to drive out the French, and the great Hohenzollern Redoubt, whence they hoped to hurl the British.

During the night the magnificent British Guards division had been moved up to Loos, and airmen reported that two divisions of the Prussian Guard had been hurriedly brought back from the eastern front, so that the British high command knew there would be heavy fighting that day.

In the morning the Grenadier and Coldstream Guards, splendid-looking men, moved up into the front trenches, and the Wessex and other Territorial regiments moved back as a support. Vivian gazed with pride at his old regiment, the Coldstreamers, but, alas! it was not the battalion which had faced the foe so heroically at Mons and Landrecies. They had all vanished; but their successors were clearly of the same stamp, though younger and less experienced soldiers. That day was to show that they were ready to live up to the traditions of the British Guards.

Early in the morning the Germans poured forth a terrific artillery fire on the whole position, from La Bassée to Lens. It was particularly violent in the region of Loos, Hill 70, and the Hohenzollern Redoubt. The British guns replied no less determinedly, and a fierce duel was maintained. Then the enemy tried to launch a gas attack, but the wind was unfavourable. Lachrymatory shells were dropped, and a fierce infantry attack was made; but the British stood firm. What they had won by days of fierce fighting, and paid for with the blood of gallant comrades, they would hold while they had life, and the fierce attacks were beaten back.

The Wessex, though under shell-fire all the time, were little more than spectators of the morning's fighting. Their turn did not come until the afternoon. News was received that the British, attacked by overwhelming numbers, had been slowly forced back to the eastern portion of the Hohenzollern Redoubt, that the General in command had been killed, and that, in spite of the most determined efforts, the British had been unable to recapture the lost ground.

'We'll see whether we can't make up for our reverse there by smashing the enemy in front of us,' said the Brigadier-General of the Guards grimly to his regimental officers, and the arrangements were hurriedly made.

From the trenches in which the Wessex were a good view across the shallow valley could be obtained. In their front was a chalk-pit, with some ruined brick cottages and a spinney round them; to their left the ugly chimney of Mine 14 bis, surrounded by the entrenchments and sand-bag parapets known as the Keep; away to the right Hill 70, the redoubt on its farther side being hidden by the crest.

The British guns carefully prepared the position; and at four o'clock the Irish Guards, marching as steadily as though on a ceremonial parade at Wellington Barracks, advanced towards the spinney. A rousing cheer from the supports rang out. At the same time, with a truly terrific Scotch yell, the Scots Guards, advancing under a perfect hell of shrapnel, rushed down the slope and made for Pit 14 and the Keep.

Every man in the support-trenches, heedless of danger, was standing on the parapet cheering wildly. They saw the colonel of the Scots fall; but the major took his place, and they raced on. One after another the officers went down; in sixes the men dropped, but not a man faltered; and presently, in spite of a tremendous machine-gun fire, they reached the buildings and disappeared amongst them. The Irish had been driven back at first, but had rallied, and had then occupied the spinney.

'What magnificent fellows! What bravery!' cried Vivian. 'Oh Oliver, there are no troops like the Guards in the world; but they will be exterminated. Why don't they send us on in support?'

As though in answer to his question, the Cold-

streamers were seen advancing on the chalk-pit, while two companies of Grenadiers went racing to support the Scots, and the fighting became murderous in its intensity.

The moment had arrived for the attack on Hill 70 to be made, and Grenadier and Welsh Guards, the latter under fire for the first time, entered the communication-trenches that led to the summit of Hill 70. The Wessex were moved up in support, the men being delighted to get their chance at last.

'We'll have the hill before nightfall, I hope,' said Oliver to Vivian as they shook hands before they advanced.

The Germans had been heavily reinforced, and opened an absolutely hellish fire; but Guards and Territorials advanced in open order across the dead ground, and their losses were not heavy. The front-line German trenches were easily captured, and the attack swept on towards the crest. But the Guards had stubborn fighting, and the Wessex crept closer and closer to the front lines, so that they all reached the crest together. When their figures were outlined against the sky they were greeted from the redoubt with such a murderous fire at short range that they were driven back over the crest.

'Now, lads!' cried a splendid-looking officer of the Grenadiers, 'the Guards are not going to be defeated. Follow me;' and he again dashed down the slope, the men after him. A bullet crashed into his brain.

'Avenge his fall,' cried a young lieutenant who took his place; but a shell blew him to pieces.

'This way, Grenadiers,' and a sergeant waved his rifle; but he fell, as did dozens of others; and

presently the Guards were back again. Once more

they charged.

Colonel Hastings, rallying his men, shouted, 'Now, Wessex, show the Guards how Terriers fight!' and with an inspiring cheer the Wessex, shoulder to shoulder, dashed down at the redoubt. But it was no good; five times they attempted the task, and then, spent and bleeding, had to retire over the crest.

Orders were given to dig in where they were, and

spades went to work in the blood-stained earth.

Meanwhile the Scots Guards had captured Pit 14, but had found it untenable; the Grenadiers had captured the Keep, where a few survivors still hung on to it; the Coldstreamers had the chalk-pit, and the Irish Guards the spinney, and they were also busy digging in.

When it was found Pit 14 could not be held, two companies of Scots and Grenadier Guards were ordered to retire, and in column of route, with correct intervals and every rifle at the slope, they marched proudly up the hill as if on parade, and, though under a perfect inferno of fire, suffered very little loss. Well may the British Guards be proud of their record!

By the end of the day Oliver and Vivian were both in command of the remains of companies; and such losses had the regiment suffered that both had to wield spade and pick to scratch out the two-feet-six of earth which has first to be removed in digging in.

When it was dark, rolls of barbed wire had to be carried out and unwound from the reels, and left curled about the ground in serpentine loops, so as to impede a sudden rush of the enemy. A dismounted cavalry brigade came up from Loos, and worked like

Trojans to assist their comrades of the infantry. All the night through, in drenching weather, and fired on incessantly, they toiled, and by daylight had formed such a defence that it would cost the Germans dear to capture it. Then, the cavalrymen taking over the defence of the trench, Guards and Territorials, utterly exhausted, after twenty-four hours of incessant work and fighting, sank on the sodden ground to snatch a few hours' rest.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

#### HOLDING ON.

To the men who lived through the next two days and nights on the slope of Hill 70, the time seemed like some hideous and fantastic nightmare. It was one round of constant digging and fighting. The enemy kept up a heavy bombardment, which ceased only when infantry attacks were launched. Then tools had to be dropped, rifles taken in hand, and every man had to fight tenaciously for the patch of trench he occupied. The attack defeated, the dead and wounded were placed in the bottom of the trench, to be conveyed to the rear under the cover of darkness, and the digging and consolidating went on as before.

On the second night the Second Guards brigade took over the trenches, and the war-worn survivors of the desperate attack on Loos went back to that town for a well-earned rest. During the last two days, on the ensanguined slopes of Hill 70, sleep had been practically out of the question; and as, in the darkness, the men marched away from the trenches many stumbled and fell from sheer exhaustion, and, though under heavy shell-fire, would have remained where they fell and dropped straight off to sleep had it not been for those of their comrades who had just enough go left to get back into Loos.

Amidst the ruins they curled up anywhere, and in o.H.

ten minutes the whole lot were deep in the dreamless slumber of the absolutely exhausted.

The next day Oliver and Vivian, refreshed by twelve hours' sleep, had a look round at the town. Since they had entered it with the first rush of the British troops successive bombardments had reduced it almost to a mass of ruins, above which the twin towers of Loos stood up like the iron rigging of a shipwrecked vessel. Outside the town were shattered and torn wire defences, amongst which the dead were still lying thickly scattered. A redoubt, smashed to pieces by the British artillery, lay beyond the wire, the neighbouring ground being torn and mangled into great heaps, among which remains of German bodies still lay. Fragments of shells, cases, empty machine-gun belts, broken weapons, discarded accoutrements, and dead bodies were visible on all hands. Away to the front was Hill 70, where fierce fighting was still going on; to the left Hulluch, the Quarries, and the Hohenzollern Redoubt; to the right Souchez.

Overhead high-explosive shells were wailing and screaming, while the never-ending mutter of machinegun and rifle fire was incessant. Aeroplanes, like giant vultures, were swooping about, and the struggle was still being maintained with great bitterness.

Fresh troops, clean and smart, came marching along to relieve those for whom rest was imperative, and these men, undeterred by the ghastly scenes around them, cheered their comrades who had been fighting for days, and were cheered in return. There was everywhere a feeling of optimism. Loos had been taken, the Hohenzollern Redoubt stormed; those war-stained heroes had successfully performed their

part; the reinforcements would consolidate the victory.

Though away from the trenches, there was plenty of work for the Wessex, and work of an arduous and dangerous nature, too. The consolidation of a position won is often a more difficult task than actual capture, and at Loos the enemy fought savagely and insistently in his efforts to regain every foot of ground he had lost. The British were just as determined to hold the ground they had won; and so digging and securing positions, building new gun emplacements, the hurrying up of supplies of food and ammunition, and the creation of new dressing-stations gave ample employment to the reserve troops.

There were various moves being carried out too. The French were taking over many of the points captured by the British, who were moving to new positions, and all the time fierce attacks and counter-

attacks were waged with varying success.

The Wessex Fusiliers had barely four hundred bayonets left out of nearly eleven hundred, and they were brigaded with another weak battalion in order

to form a regiment.

'Never no business to lose so many men,' grumbled Rock, as the battalion was dismissed after the first roll-call since the big attack. 'They used to shout about the yellow-fever when I was sojerin'—he spoke of his days in the Regulars as 'sojerin' as opposed to his present service, which he called 'navvyin'—'but old yaller-jack didn't account for men at the rate the 'Uns do, an' I reckon a lot o' it's bad management.'

'Things will be better when you get in command,

Cheery,' said Oliver. 'Meanwhile, don't let us get down-hearted.'

'It 'u'd take more'n Germans to make me down-'earted,' replied Rock; 'but that ain't no reason for messin' things up.'

'No reason at all,' agreed Oliver; and they went

off to their quarters.

A week after they had been relieved from Hill 70 the Wessex were moved up north of the Hulluch-Vermelles road, opposite the Hohenzollern Redoubt, for which there had been such desperate fighting. This redoubt, like the famous Labyrinth which the French had taken, had been looked upon by the Germans as impregnable, and its capture by the British had caused widespread consternation in the ranks of the enemy. The news of its loss was carefully withheld from the people in Germany, and the General Staff determined to recapture it before the disaster had to be acknowledged. Something of this was anticipated by the British, who made what preparations they could to meet the furious counter-attacks which they knew would soon be made.

Oliver's and the Guards brigade were moved up into the advanced trenches; and as, in the darkness of the night, they made their way along they were subjected to a heavy shelling, punctuated by storms

of bullets from machine-guns.

'The Boche seems particularly desirous of strafing us,' said Vivian, as a number of starlights went up in the hope of disclosing the whereabouts of the relieving men.

'Yes; he hasn't forgiven us for the loss of Loos and Souchez,' replied Oliver. 'Germany is feverishly anxious not to sustain defeats just now. It not only affects the spirits of her own troops; it must also largely influence the opinions of the neutrals.'

'The war won't be won or lost through any one's opinions; the bayonet will be the deciding factor.'

'And that Fritz doesn't seem over-inclined to face.'

'Not when it's in British hands; but he's a stubborn fighter for all that.'

The starlights having died down, the advance was renewed, and soon the platoons were filing along the communication-trenches.

The particular part in which Oliver and Vivian found themselves was not a very inviting one. It was in a trench known as the Big Willie, which ran from the Hohenzollern Redoubt to the main German trench, the Little Willie trench being away on their left. All night long a severe bombardment was maintained; and Verrey lights went up every two minutes or so, when the enemy turned on his machine-guns.

Every man in the British trenches was kept under arms, and those who were not doing sentry duty were busy filling and repairing sand-bags which had been severely knocked about by the German shells during the day.

'Why can't they come out in the open like men, and put up a decent scrap?' growled Rock, who was back again on duty.

'They've tried that, and it didn't pay,' replied Oliver.

'This 'ere 'orrible muckin' about in mud an' filth, a-diggin' an' shovellin', is no work for sojers.'

'Seems as if soldiers had to do it, though; doesn't it?'

'More fools them!' and Rock beat a sand-bag savagely down in its place on the parapet, narrowly missing a bullet through his head as he did so.

Colonel Hastings seemed worried about their position. 'It's a nasty salient just here,' he said to Oliver and Vivian, 'particularly open to a sudden rush. During the day, I am told, the enemy has succeeded in recapturing a part of the Hohenzollern Redoubt, and we have it on the authority of our airmen and spies that the Crown Prince of Bavaria is determined "at any cost"—and you know what the German staff mean by that—to recapture the whole redoubt, and force us back to our original position.'

'Well, let them try it; we're ready,' said Vivian.

'We're always ready to face any odds, I know; but it's rumoured that several divisions of the Imperial Guard have been hurried up, and that they are determined to secure a victory.'

'We've met the German Guards before, dad, and they didn't get the best of it. At Ypres a whole division attacked our trenches, but they left most of their number dead on the ground.'

'And will again,' said Vivian.

'Well, if the new army can give a good account of them it has nothing else to fear,' said the Colonel. 'But there's another point I want to warn you against. The Germans are mining under our trench, and I want you to listen for their workers. So long as you can hear them you're all right. Should they cease working the men must retire to the support-trench, for the probability is the Germans will explode their mine within half-an-hour of leaving off work.'

'That's serious indeed. The men have a holy

horror of mines; it's the one thing that seems to unnerve them.'

'Establish listening-posts, and see what you can do.'

'In this pandemonium it's difficult to hear anything, and no man could live long outside the trenches to-night.'

'Well, boys, do your best, and God grant you come

through all right. I must get along.'

Oliver and Vivian, working under a severe fire, managed to dig out a sap; and then, by lying on the ground, the noise of the German miners could be distinctly heard. Men listened for half-an-hour at a time, and during the whole night work went on.

It was a relief when, after the usual 'stand to,' dawn was seen to be breaking. It was probably the last day a good many of them would see; but they welcomed the light; for, if they had to die, they felt they would sooner die in daylight. Soon, concealing the smoke of their fires as well as they could, the Tommies were frizzling rashers and boiling tea. The greatest care had to be taken, for whenever the smoke was seen curling upwards the Boche knew that several men would be gathered round the cheery blaze, and a whiz-bang, trench bomb, or half-a-dozen grenades were certain to be sent over as a morning greeting.

Breakfast disposed of, the work of tidying up was commenced, and soon everything was shipshape. All the while a heavy bombardment was kept up, and during the morning a draft of one hundred and fifty of the Wessex, just out from England, was marched in to the front from the reserve-trenches.

'We must be pretty hard up for men for them to

do this,' whispered Oliver to Vivian. 'It's a severe test for untried men.'

'Let's go along and see how they take it,' said Vivian; and they crept away.

It was soon quite evident that they had no reason to feel anxious. The new arrivals, mostly quite youngsters, were sitting on the fire-step or standing pressed against the sides of the trench. Some were talking cheerily, some making weird noises on the inevitable mouth-organ. One or two were reading; others were hastily scribbling a post-card to some loved one at home; while two men were actually playing cards. Nowhere was there any sign of funk, although the ordeal was one to try the nerves of an old campaigner.

'They're simply marvellous!' whispered Vivian to

Oliver; 'they must have nerves of steel.'

'They're a plucky lot, anyway. Still, it's no good running unnecessary risks, so all those not wanted had better pack into the dugouts.'

This was done, but not without some smiling remonstrances on the part of the men, who declared they were all right, and only waiting for the word to climb over the parapet.

'There will be no climbing over to-day, lads,' said Vivian to several of them. 'It's the turn of the

Boche to pay us a visit, I think.'

'And he'll get such a warm reception that he'll very likely stay, as a token of his love for us, and his attachment to the soil,' cried a youngster who posed as a wag.

As the morning wore on the shelling increased in violence, high-explosive and shrapnel shells literally raining on the front-line trenches.

Presently a German Taube, like a bird of ill-omen,

came swooping over the British lines, registering the German fire; and, the range being corrected, shells were placed with the most deadly accuracy, blowing sand-bags, parapets, dugouts, and, alas! men, literally to pieces.

A few puffs of white smoke round the Taube showed the artillery were firing at it, but it ignored them until a British machine was seen making straight for it. For a moment it circled and blazed away with its gun at the British aviator, who made a nose-dive and get to close quarters. There was an exchange of shots, and the Taube was seen to drop suddenly, then right itself and make for the German lines, pursued by the British machine, which presently was seen returning.

The bombardment continued to increase until about three o'clock, when to the artillery fire was added rifle and machine-gun fire from all points of the crescent-shaped German position.

'This is decidedly unpleasant,' said Vivian to the

Adjutant, who came along by his dugout.

'Very hot, and only the prelude to a determined attack. Our airmen report that ten battalions are mustered near Hill 70, fully a dozen more opposite the chalk-pit, and from six to eight opposite us, waiting for the guns to cease, when they will try to rush our positions. That's what I've come to warn you about.'

'My platoon is ready, and every man can be relied

on. We shall fight as long as a man can stand.'

'So will every one; but it's as well to know what is before you. When the bombardment stops get your men on the alert.'

They had hardly finished speaking when, as if by

magic, the thunder of the big guns ceased, and a minute or two later so did the rattle of small arms. Then the men tumbled out of their dugouts, reserve ammunition boxes were opened, while every man sat in his place on the fire-step ready to spring up on getting the word.

A trying five minutes passed. The silence was eerie, and those who had for hours stood the nerveracking noise unmoved grew nervous and fidgety. Presently a whisper ran down the trench, 'They're coming;' and the command followed, 'Man the

parapets.'

Hundreds of pairs of eyes eagerly peered over the 'no man's land' that the new arrivals had never yet seen; and there, scrambling out of their trenches and advancing shoulder to shoulder, line succeeding line, came waves of Germans—picked troops all. Behind the trenches more columns were seen issuing from the woods; and behind them again, from the buildings and villages, streams of men were advancing to support the attack, which the veriest tyro knew was going to be a severe one.

The veterans on the British side smiled grimly under their moustaches. They had seen the same tactics before at Mons and Ypres, and they waited confidently, with finger on trigger, until the word

should be given to fire.

It was exactly four o'clock when the Germans left their trenches, and at one minute past British and French guns opened on the supporting troops. Then the machine-guns were turned on to the advancing masses, and the word was passed for rapid fire. A hurricane of lead swept from the British trenches, and the advancing Germans reeled as though from the effects of an earthquake. Gaps appeared, and the men seemed to be split into groups, which kept ambling on till presently they in turn fell. Succeeding waves pressed on, not hurriedly, but doggedly, almost hopelessly; but in turn many of them threw up their arms and fell face downwards, or spun round and fell, until they too were on the ground. Others behind came on, and those nearest to the British trenches, who had only been wounded, crawled forward on hands and knees, those who were able halting every now and then to fire; while many a man, with a last despairing effort, shook his fist at the hated English, and then dropped dead. No cowards these; die they might, but until they did they would fight.

And so it went on for an hour, the enemy getting gradually nearer the trenches, but only at a fearful sacrifice.

After all attacks on Oliver's trench had failed, the Germans ceased hurling men against it, and reopened the bombardment, sending every kind of shell—high-explosive, shrapnel, trench bomb, and grenade—into it. The men crouched down and took what shelter they could; but they had a fair number of casualties, and there was considerable difficulty in getting the wounded away. After an hour of that, another heavy attack with more men than ever was launched; and though the defenders fired their rifles until they were so hot that they could not hold them, reduced in numbers as they were, they could not stem the rush.

The Germans belonged to a Garde Jäger corps, and came on gallantly enough. Soon they reached the parapet, and, hurling bombs into the trench, a

dozen leapt down, only to be promptly bayoneted. An officer took a flying leap and landed close to Oliver, at whom he thrust with his sword; but a shot from Oliver's revolver laid him low. Another German thrust at him with his bayonet, and transfixed the sleeve of his tunic, to fall himself next moment with his head crushed by the rifle-butt of a Wessex man. Another shot from Oliver accounted for a third German, and the danger was over for the moment. But hundreds more were surging up, and it was clear that the trench could be no longer held. To remain meant death or capture, and the word to retire was given. Sullenly the men filed off down a communication-trench, taking their wounded with them. Oliver and Rock were amongst the last to leave, firing at the Germans swarming over the parapet as they did so.

The remains of a machine-gun section, with their gun, were with them, and half-way down the communication-trench the gun was posted. The enemy, seeing the gun, made a rush to capture it, crowding into the communication-trench. They were too jammed up to fire, and after the first two had thrown bombs, with a yell they surged forward. Oliver let them get within five yards, and then he turned the machine-gun on them. It swept the narrow passage with a hail of death, and in one minute not a German there was alive. Others, in no wise deterred, came climbing over their dead and wounded comrades, only to meet the same fate, until the communication-trench was simply impassable.

'Better'n sand-bags,' said Rock grimly; but, a bomb exploding on the side of the trench, he was hurled aside with the rush of air. Oliver glanced up from the trench. The Germans, seeing they could not get at the gun along the communication-trench, had swarmed out of the front-line trench, and were running across the open to take the defenders in flank.

'Run, men, for your lives, and take the gun with you!' cried Oliver; but they would not have had time to do so had not those in the support-trench seen the move, and mowed down the too daring Germans with rifle-fire.

Oliver saw the danger of his position, and retired close to the support-trench, and there they remained, defending the way against all enemy attacks until darkness fell.

Vivian succeeded in finding Oliver when it was dark. 'It's a bad job our losing that trench,' he said. 'I hear that at only one other point has our line been pierced.'

Oliver noticed that his friend had a bandage round his head. 'Hallo, old chap! are you much hurt?' he asked anxiously.

'A mere scratch! A bullet shaved my head and knocked me dizzy for some moments; but a drink of water and a bandage put me all right.'

'Thank God for that! As to losing the trench, I'd have stuck it and fought it out had we not been ordered to retire.'

'Wouldn't have mended matters a bit, old man, to have stayed. Every one would have been killed, and the Boches would have had the trench all the same.'

'The tinkers! I expect they would; they fought like devils.'

'You did splendid work with that machine-gun.

The fellows say you ought to get a "mention" for that.'

'Bah, Vivian! what do you and I care for "mentions"? Any one who came through Mons and Le Cateau can dispense with all that. Show me a way to retake that trench; that's all I want.'

'I'm coming to that. The Coldstreamers on our right also lost part of their trench, and a young sergeant who spoke to me while I was getting my head bandaged swore that he and his comrades would get back the trench to-night, or die in the attempt.'

'By Jove! he's the man I want to see.'

'Well, he's just along here;' and in a moment Oliver and Vivian were talking with a fair-haired young sergeant of the Guards. The three arranged the details of a plan to be put into execution at midnight, and volunteers were called for. Sixty men, Guardsmen and Wessex, were chosen, and, permission having been given for the attempt, preparations were made to carry it out.

## CHAPTER XXX.

### THE COUNTER-ATTACK.

The young sergeant, whose name was Banks, since the original idea had been his, was given command of the first twenty. These were armed with four Mill's bombs each. Oliver had twenty men behind, armed with rifles and bayonets, and each carrying two bombs; and Vivian, with his twenty men and a machine-gun, was to move along the communication-trench as far as he could, and then they were to open fire with rifles, taking cover behind the dead bodies of the Germans. The communication-trench, being the most likely point of attack, was sure to be watched, and in expectation of a determined attempt, the Germans would mass near the entrance to the trench.

Banks and his men, creeping forward silently, got as near the captured trench as they could, and then waited until the fire of Vivian's men showed that they had got into action. Waiting for a couple of minutes to allow the Germans to gather at the end of the communication-trench, Banks led his men forward with a rush. Without losing a man, having taken the enemy entirely by surprise, they reached the trench, and, running along the parados, hurled their bombs. Wild yells and shrieks burst from the trench, and the enemy, as always when taken by surprise, were utterly confused. Before they had

grasped the situation, the bombers were in the trench; and, half turning to the right and half to the left, they pressed forward, driving the Germans before them. Oliver was in the trench with his men almost as soon as the bombers; and, a bomber and a rifleman working side by side, a savage struggle began. Bombs, bayonets, and rifle-butts were used with deadly effect, and terrible scenes were enacted in the darkness. Quarter was neither asked for nor given.

Oliver having worked along as far as the communication-trench, he and half-a-dozen men seized the bodies of the dead Germans and hurled them out. Vivian and his men worked from the other end, and soon they had joined hands. The machine-gun was brought along and mounted on the front parapet, sweeping the 'no man's land' and preventing the Germans from sending up reinforcements. Verrey lights were also sent up, and this was the signal for reinforcements to be poured along the communication-trench. These joined in the work going forward, and in fifteen minutes there was not a German alive in the trench. Another machine-gun was hurried up, and then all waited for the counter-attack which was sure to follow.

Within half-an-hour this was attempted, a mass of men charging up to the trench; but machine-gun and rapid fire accounted for every one; and within an hour of the first shot being fired by Vivian's men the trench was securely in the hands of the British.

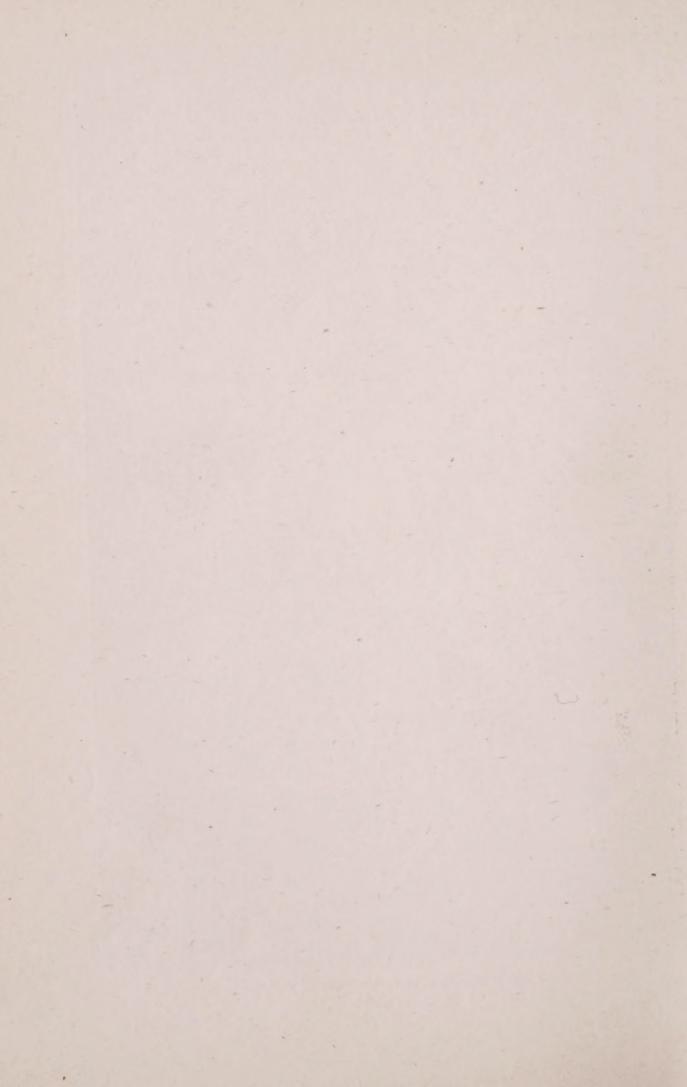
'This is glorious, Vivian!' said Oliver. 'It will discourage the Boche more than all his previous losses. To lose what he has once gained riles him immensely.'



'As your commanding officer, I command you, go to your men, sir!'

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O. H.



'And we'll hang on this time,' replied Vivian.

'Wild horses won't turn me out of this again.'
Their losses had been remarkably small—three were killed and a few more wounded. Every one was in the highest of spirits, and Guardsmen and Wessex complimented each other on their achievement. They were determined to hold the recaptured trench while one of them remained alive. But, contrary to all expectations, no further attack was made upon them that night.

Morning showed thousands of German dead in front of the British trenches. The whole attack had failed, being in most places repulsed from the first, while those portions of the Big Willie trench which had been lost through sheer weight of numbers had been gallantly recaptured.

This repulse of the Germans seemed to make them only the more determined to oust the British from the trenches they had taken; and for some time aerial fights and minor engagements, in which the Wessex had their share, were frequent.

'I suppose we shall have to give Brother Fritz another shaking up in this quarter before he'll be quiet,' said Oliver to Vivian a few days after the recapture of the trench.

'I suppose we shall; he doesn't seem satisfied.'

Vivian's prophecy proved right, for one raw and chilly morning, when the wind was blowing steadily from the west, and a thick Scotch mist covered the ground, it leaked out that an attack on the Hohenzollern Redoubt, of which the Germans still held a portion, would be made that day.

It was no casual attack; every detail had been thoroughly thought out and carefully arranged.

Stores of shells had been replenished, fresh troops brought up, new gas-masks provided, long, curious-looking iron cylinders conveyed to the front-line trenches, and plentiful reserves of ammunition accumulated.

Punctually at noon a terrific bombardment, as heavy as that which opened the battle of Loos, broke out from the British lines. Buildings crumbled away, trenches and dugouts were battered to pieces, wire entanglements were blown to invisible scraps, and the surrounding country deluged with shells.

An hour passed, and then the mysterious cylinders were lifted up over the parapets, their nozzles unscrewed, and a dense cloud of white smoke, fringed below with green and red, floated away towards the Hohenzollern Redoubt.

'I wonder how the Boche likes being repaid in his own coin,' said Vivian, as he watched the smoke creeping onwards.

'About as little as we do,' replied Oliver; 'but he'll put up a stiff fight for all that, I expect.'

The smoke wall, half a mile broad, floated on, and settled round the redoubt, the slag-heap behind it, and the buildings of Pit 8.

'Now, men,' cried Vivian, 'off with your greatcoats, and get your gas-masks properly fixed.'

A small ration of rum had been served out, and each man had a couple of Mill's bombs in addition to rifle and bayonet. All were keenly eager to advance, and officers experienced difficulty in holding the men back until the moment to get over the parapets arrived. The redoubt, bean-shaped, was right in front of them. From the German main trench ran two trenches nicknamed by the British

Big and Little Willie, and between these two other trenches led back to the German entrenchments, behind which were the slag-heaps known as the Dump. Through this Dump the enemy had run timbered galleries, and from loopholes in these numerous machine-guns pointed in all directions. In the dugouts were crowds of bombers, and the British officers, at least, knew that the task set them was one which would require every ounce of energy and the most splendid pluck to accomplish.

Exactly at two o'clock the British bombardment ceased, and, with a rush, over the parapet went the Wessex, Leicesters and Lincolns on the right and left of them. As hard as they could pelt they ran forward, high-explosive and shrapnel raining on them. Then through the smoke came showers of machinegun bullets, and the casualties were heavy. Nothing daunted, on rushed the Territorials, and reached the remains of the barbed wire, which was almost entirely demolished. Another moment, and the first enemy trench was reached. Planks were thrown across, over which the men ran on to the second trench, where a short, sharp fight took place.

German equipment, bags of bombs, and dead bodies lay about everywhere, and the British, successful but breathless, tore off their gas-helmets. Word was passed for the men to hold the trench until reinforcements came up, and a brief breathing-space was afforded.

Suddenly Rock seized Oliver's arm. 'Are these our chaps?' he asked, and pointed to a number of men in gas-helmets advancing rapidly along a trench at right angles to the one they were holding. Only their bluish-gray gas-helmets were visible, and it

was impossible to say whether they were German or British.

'Get ready for rapid fire!' cried Oliver to his men; 'but don't fire till I raise my arm.'

Round the corner came a man in blue-gray uniform.

'Boches!' cried Oliver, and up went his arm. Crashing volleys rang out from the British, then a rush forward, and bomb and bayonet settled the business.

Again an advance was made, and the men, now all mixed up, dashed, in the teeth of a terrific fire, right at the redoubt. The fighting was of the most desperate character; but the British swept right over the redoubt, and presently Oliver found himself with a small party in the Little Willie trench. But beyond this they could not get, and a fierce fight with bombs was maintained.

For two hours they held the position; then reinforcements, led by Colonel Hastings, came along the trench. 'We are ordered to hold on here at any cost,' he said, 'and to do so we must carry the Dump. The enemy can get an enfilade fire on us, and will blow us to bits as soon as he can fire without hitting his own men.'

'We shall have to charge across the open to get at him,' said Oliver dubiously.

'I know, but we must attempt it. Where is Vivian?'

'I haven't seen him since the first advance; he may be hit.'

'Well, warn the men, and when I give three blasts on my whistle, follow me.'

# CHAPTER XXXI.

### THE END OF THE FIGHT.

IN ten minutes all was ready. The Colonel blew his whistle, and, scrambling from the trench, dashed straight for the Dump. Oliver was beside him, and the men, in open order, close behind.

They hadn't gone twenty yards when, with a sharp cry, Colonel Hastings fell, shot through the

body.

Oliver threw himself beside him. 'Father, father!' he cried; but he got no answer. In a fever of grief he tore his flask round, unscrewed it, and poured some rum-and-water into his father's mouth. In a second or two Colonel Hastings, his face deadly pale, recovered, and, struggling on to one elbow, looked round him. The men were still running on towards the Dump under a hellish fire.

'Father!' again cried Oliver, in an agony of fear,

'where are you hit?'

'Is that you, Oliver?' gasped the Colonel. 'Leave me. Go on; your place is with your men.'

'I cannot leave you, father.'

'Go. I can do no more. Leave me.'

'I cannot, father.'

The Colonel made an effort, though it cost him excruciating pain. He struggled up on one elbow, and, pointing towards the charging men with his other hand, said, 'As your commanding officer, I command you, go to your men, sir.'

'Father, father!' cried Oliver. 'My God! I cannot leave you.'

'Then I will lead them,' and the Colonel actually endeavoured to rise; but the effort was too much

for him, and he rolled back fainting.

Again Oliver poured spirit into his mouth, and then, seeing the blood welling from his father's chest, he tore open the tunic, and hastily tied his field dressing round the wound.

The Colonel opened his eyes. 'Go, Oliver, my boy,' he said. 'Don't let me die with the thought that a Hastings ever held back in face of the enemy.'

'How can I leave you to die thus, father?'

'Go; your life is your country's! It is my last command—go!' And the gallant soldier fell back unconscious.

With a heart-broken groan, Oliver got on to his feet, the bitterness of death in his heart. He rushed on after his men, bullets whistling round him. He had a dim idea afterwards of reaching the Dump, of using a rifle and bayonet with good effect, and then of finding himself with Captain Lloyd, the Dump captured.

A counter-attack was driven off, and then Oliver, his reasoning powers restored, told Captain Lloyd of the fall of the Colonel.

'May I go back and see if he still lives?' he pleaded.

'The Colonel down! That's bad news,' said Captain Lloyd.

Rock, who had found Oliver, overheard the remark. 'What! the Colonel 'it?' he repeated. 'We'll give them 'Uns'ell for that. Is 'e dead?'

<sup>&#</sup>x27;I don't know.'

'We'll soon find out.—Captain,' to Lloyd, 'let us go an' see. We'll never be able to 'old this 'ere 'ole, an' if night falls, an' we are wiped out or 'ave to 'ook it, the Colonel'll fall into the 'ands o' the 'Uns, an' then—well, he'd better die now.'

'I can't spare you; but go,' said Captain Lloyd.

Without a moment's hesitation Oliver and Rock ran back over the shell-swept area, having the most marvellous escapes. At first they could not discover the spot where the Colonel had fallen; but presently they found him. He was deadly pale and still unconscious, and Oliver could not tell whether he was alive or dead.

'We'll get his body in, any'ow,' muttered Rock, and he and Oliver gently lifted up the Colonel. Shells burst all round them, and bullets fairly hummed in the air. The Colonel was a heavy man, and every now and then they had to rest, lying flat on the ground beside their burden to escape the bullets. At last they reached the Big Willie trench, and there they found Skinner nursing his left arm, which had been shot through.

'Hallo, Hastings! glad to see you safe. I've got a "blighty," I think.' Receiving no answer, he went on, 'Whom have you got there?'

'My father,' replied Oliver in low tones.

'By Jove, Hastings! I am sorry;' and, ignoring his own wound, Skinner immediately came up and gave a helping hand. Soon they arrived at an advance first field-dressing station, and at Oliver's earnest request the doctor came and looked at the Colonel.

'H'm!' said the doctor, turning down the Colonel's eyelid, 'he's alive; but he's got a nasty one there.'

'Do you think it is a mortal wound, doctor?'

'Can't say, youngster. Is he your colonel?'

'And my father.'

'Poor lad!' and the doctor patted Oliver on the shoulder. 'I'll do what I can for him; but my hands are terribly full just now.'

In a minute a R.A.M.C. man was pouring some liquid into the Colonel's mouth, and the doctor was examining the wound. While he was dressing it Skinner said, 'Hastings, when my scratch is bound up'—the scratch was a broken bone and a badly lacerated flesh-wound, from which he had lost a large quantity of blood—'I promise you I will remain by the Colonel and do all I can for him.'

'A thousand thanks, Skinner!' said Oliver. 'If ever I can do as much for you, I will.'

Some bearers having arrived, the Colonel, still unconscious, was put on a stretcher, and the doctor, turning to Oliver, said, 'I have done all I can at the moment. There may be a chance for your father, but I can't say yet.—Now, youngster,' to Skinner, 'what's your trouble?'

While Skinner was having his arm dressed Oliver bade him good-bye, and he and Rock started back for the Dump, taking with them several men who, having had slight hurts dressed, insisted upon going back into the fight.

The return journey was safely made, and the Dump reached. Desperate fighting was going on there, which lasted until night fell.

Weary with the exertions and excitement of the day, and depressed over the loss of his father, Oliver was eating some biscuits and jam, when he heard two men telling one another in a low whisper that the

Colonel had been killed. Instantly Oliver questioned them as to how they had obtained the news. 'Some men, under cover of the darkness,' they said, 'had come up, and had heard the news from a wounded man on his way to the base hospital.'

'The Colonel had been brought in wounded, and had died on his way to the base hospital;' that was the report. No further information could be obtained; but it agreed with what Oliver knew of the actual facts, and he did not doubt its accuracy.

'A good soldier! a fine soldier!' muttered Rock; one o' the old school! They don't make 'em like that now.'

Oliver sat brooding till he felt a sympathetic touch on his shoulder, and then his hand was clasped in a firm, warm grasp. He looked up to see Vivian before him.

'My dear old chap,' said Vivian, 'this is a heavy blow. You've heard the news, of course?'

'Vivian, is it you? I wondered if you had gone under too.'

'No; I got separated from our men in the rush. Tell me how the Colonel fell.'

Oliver related the story.

'Twill be a sad blow for Mrs Hastings and—your sister.'

'Why wasn't it I? I could have been spared; but the poor old dad!' and Oliver hid his face in his hands.

'Cheer up, Oliver; it's a glorious death. It's the one he would have chosen. God knows, I loved him, and feel his loss as deeply as though he were my own father; but unless we win this war I would rather be with him than live.'

'And I!' replied Oliver. 'It's unmanly to sit and whine. I will avenge him;' and he started up.

The Germans had been quiet for some time, but now they opened a hot bombardment on the Dump. The men took what cover they could until the infantry attack came, and then, weary though they were, repulsed attack after attack.

Oliver had seven men to defend a saphead, and they hurled bombs till their arms ached. One by one the defenders fell, until only Rock and Oliver were left on their feet, and they two kept the enemy at bay for four hours.

'It seems as if we cannot get hit,' said Oliver wearily when, the dawn breaking, they surveyed the corpses, both British and German, around them.

'Some must come through,' replied Rock, 'if it's only to take back the news of our failure.'

'We've held what we've taken, anyhow,' said Oliver grimly.

'But we want three times the number o' men to push on an' finish what we've begun. Till then we'll never whack the 'Uns. A man can't fight for a week on end.'

There was a certain amount of truth in old Rock's statement, and Oliver felt that if reinforcements did not soon arrive they would have to fall back from sheer exhaustion.

Some fresh troops did arrive, and the Sherwood Foresters made a gallant attempt to gain entirely the Big Willie trench from the redoubt; but so strong were the Germans that the attack could not be brought to a successful issue.

Still the British held on to the Hohenzollern Redoubt. They had captured it, and had they been ordered to retreat it is doubtful if they would have obeyed, so determined were they. Captain Lloyd, who was in command of the remnant of the Wessex, complimented Oliver and Rock on the way they had held the saphead all through the night, and said that if he lived he would certainly report the matter to the General.

During the morning the stock of bombs was exhausted, and Oliver volunteered to fetch up a fresh supply; four other men, amongst them Rock, also volunteered. It was a forlorn hope, for they had to cross the open, swept by machine-gun fire. Nevertheless they dashed out, though two men were almost immediately shot down. The rest reached a reserve-trench, and succeeded in bringing up two boxes. More volunteers were called for, and altogether Oliver and Rock made three journeys, bringing up a sufficient supply to last some hours. How they escaped death was a mystery. Oliver seemed to court it; but though men fell all round him he escaped, and Rock's absolute indifference to danger was almost uncanny.

The bombs were badly needed, for the enemy had got to close quarters again. They were beaten off, and then they began to pump high-explosive shells over. One hit a dugout, and half-buried Vivian and seven men.

'Come, boys,' shouted Oliver; 'we may save them. Get your shovels to work!' and in full view of the enemy, who kept up a hot fire, Oliver and the men worked, succeeding in extricating all the men, of whom five were only badly bruised, among these being Vivian, and two rather severely crushed. And so the day passed; and that night the survivors were

relieved by the Guards Brigade, and marched back to the support-trenches, where, absolutely exhausted, they crawled under shelter and fell into a dead sleep.\*

\* Note D—Operations round Loos.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

### A GENTLEMAN FROM ENGLAND.

A PRETTY fine mess the 'Uns 'ave made o' us,' growled Private Richard Rock, as he looked round at the remnant of the Wessex Fusiliers when, next morning, they stood on parade in a little village three miles behind the firing-line. And indeed he spoke the bare truth, for there remained but four officers and one hundred and seventeen men on their feet, and many of these were slightly wounded. Captain Lloyd, the Adjutant, was in command, and the roll of some companies had to be called by lance-corporals, for all the senior non-commissioned officers were gone.

The roll called, a most eulogistic letter from the General commanding the division was read; where-upon Rock remarked, 'Fair words butter no parsnips.'

Then came the usual inspection of feet, after which the regiment was ordered to clean up kit, as they were destined for transfer to a base for rest and reorganisation.

Amongst the killed was Corporal Arnold, who had been of such help in tracking down the Belgian spies; while Reedsdale was wearing a sergeant's stripes.

Oliver and Vivian had taken up their quarters in a small inn, and Rock, as usual, had succeeded in making them fairly comfortable.

Both Oliver and Vivian were very much depressed;

the Colonel's fate was never absent from their minds. Oliver had, of course, made every inquiry; but with so many wounded the doctors had their hands terribly full, and it was not possible to get confirmation of the Colonel's reported death.

'If we only knew for certain,' said Oliver, 'it would not be so bad. This fearful anxiety is worse than bad news.'

'Skinner will let us know as soon as he possibly can, depend upon it,' said Vivian.

As if in answer to his words the chuff-chuff of a motor-cycle sounded. It stopped outside the house, and some one called out to a man of the Wessex, 'Say, chummy, can you tell me where Mr Hastings of yours is to be found?'

In an instant Oliver's head was out of the window. 'Who wants me?' he asked.

'Note from the base hospital, sir,' answered the despatch-rider, a mere ruddy faced British youth, not a day more than eighteen.

In less time than it takes to relate, Oliver had the note in his hand. 'Wait a minute,' he cried to the despatch-rider. Then he read out loud:

"Dear Hastings,—I am happy to tell you the Colonel is better than could have been expected. The doctor says his wound is very serious, but there is certainly a chance for him. If splendid attendance and good nursing can save him, he will pull through. He is conscious, and sends his love to you. He is to be kept absolutely quiet, so you would not be able to see him; but rely, my dear Hastings, on my doing everything that lies in my power for him. I am writing this while a most charming nurse holds the

blotting-pad for me. (I hope she isn't looking at what I write.) I am afraid my wound won't be a 'blighty' after all, so expect to see me again soon.—Yours sincerely,

NORMAN SKINNER."'

'Thank God for that!' cried Oliver. 'I feel a different man.'

'And I too,' said Vivian. 'The Colonel, I should think, has a splendid constitution. He's tough as steel; if he lasts a day or two he'll pull through.'

Oliver sent a few lines to Skinner in reply, which the despatch-rider, a ten-franc note richer, took back with him. Then he wrote a long letter to his mother; while Vivian said he would take the opportunity of sending a note to Miss Hastings. Although it was apparently only a short note, it took Vivian a very long time; and Oliver's letter was ready a good while before his friend had finished.

There was a lot to be done before they started, and they were going out, when Rock's voice was heard below. 'I tell you there ain't no Lord Rossville in the reg'ment. Think I don't know? I've bin with 'em ever since the battalion's bin formed, an' know every orficer, though, Lord knows, some wasn't worth knowin'.'

'But, my good man, Lord Rossville wasn't an officer; he was a private.'

'Oh, in-deed!' replied Rock in a most supercilious way. 'You didn't say that. O' course we've got plenty o' lords in the ranks.'

'Have you?' replied the voice.

'Sure enough; we had three in my platoon.'

'Indeed! Then perhaps you can help me to find the gentleman I'm looking for?'

'Cert'inly! Now, look over there! See 'im as is scrapin' the mud off is 'air?'

'That young man with the two others?'

'That's 'im; that's young Lord-what's 'is name?'

'Rossville.'

'Yes, just so; the little red-'eaded, pimply, bandylegged scarecrow's 'im; the thin un with 'im is the Prince o' Wales, and the other the Dook o' Westminster.'

'Dear me! this is extraordinary.'

'Yes, ain't it? Good-bye, Mr Six-an'-eight, an' mind the mud.'

'What on earth is that old scoundrel up to now?' said Oliver, who had overheard the whole conversation.

'Some foolery, I expect,' replied Vivian; and, looking from the window, they saw an immaculately dressed, middle-aged man, wearing glasses, stepping across to three privates of the Wessex who were 'cleaning up.' They saw him stop and talk to the soldiers, and then they heard a roar of laughter, and the man who had been described by Rock as a 'bandy-legged scarecrow' gave the civilian a friendly smack on the back that nearly put him on his nose.

The stranger came hastily back towards Rock, who was complacently smoking a short briar.

'What do you mean by making a fool of me?' he asked indignantly.

'Lord love yer! I never made a fool o' yer,' replied Rock stolidly. 'I reckon nature did that; though I always understood gents in your profession, which I take to be the lawyer line, was more rogues than fools.'

'I asked you a plain, simple question, and you told me a tissue of lies.'

'Oh, that's it. Well, I thought you was out tellin' fairy tales; or did you think it was the 1st o' April?'

It is doubtful how the matter would have ended

had not Oliver and Vivian come out.

Cheery Dick stiffened like a ramrod, and, removing his pipe from his mouth, stood at attention.

'What's the discussion about, Rock?' asked Oliver.

'Gent'ere come out from 'ome to provide amusements for the troops.'

'Nothing of the sort, sir,' snapped the gentleman

in the glasses.

'D' ye mean to say you 'aven't bin amusin' us?' asked Cheery Dick threateningly.

'Certainly not.'

'Lord, sir'-and Rock turned an appealing glance at his officers—'I've almost 'ad to smile myself; an' look at them three fellers over there, fair bu'stin' with laughin'.'

The three young soldiers certainly did seem to be highly amused; but Tommy is always ready to laugh

at a very small joke.

'I always had the highest respect for the British soldier,' said the civilian, 'and have ever found him most civil and obliging. I have never been laughed at in this way before.'

'Then don't you try a-pullin' o' the said British

sojer's leg.'

'Pulling his leg! Why, I never touched any of you.'

'Oh Lord, sir! take 'im away—take 'im away!'

and Rock turned up his eyes in disgust.

Both Oliver and Vivian had something to do to prevent themselves from laughing, and were moving R

away, when the civilian said, 'If I may judge from your badges, gentlemen, you belong to the Wessex Fusiliers?'

'We have that honour,' replied Vivian.

'Then perhaps you can tell me where I can find Lord Rossville?'

'He doesn't belong to ours, I think.'

'Oh yes, he does; I've traced him. But perhaps you don't know he's succeeded to his grandfather's title. You know him only as Harry Bulmer.'

'Bulmer-Bulmer? There's a Bulmer in B com-

pany, I think. Is he rather slim and dark?'

'I've never had the pleasure of seeing him, but I

believe he's a very handsome young man.'

'I don't know about that. Last time I saw him he was covered with mud and smeared with blood, I think.'

'Not wounded, sir, I hope—not wounded;' and the legal man caught hold of Vivian's arm apprehensively.

'I couldn't say whether it was his own or some-

body else's blood. Anyway, he isn't killed.'

'Oh, I'm delighted to hear that! You know he's just come into a title and a splendid property—eight thousand pounds a year, if it's a penny. It would be terrible if he were to be killed now.'

'I don't know that it would be any worse than if he hadn't got a penny,' said Vivian, a little stiffly,

for anything like money-worship he loathed.

'No, no—er—er—of course not; but can you tell me where I can find his lordship? My name's Scrivens, and I'm the late lord's solicitor. I should like to tell his present lordship of his succession personally. I have come out from England on

purpose to do so, and had great difficulty in obtaining permission to get up to this terrible place, and I'm anxious to get back again.'

'After having arranged to manage the new lord's

affairs-eh?'

'Well, of course I should like to do so; but my visit is principally congratulatory—congratulatory;' and Mr Scrivens complacently rubbed his white hands together.

'Come with me, and I'll try to find the man you want.'

Mr Scrivens set off with the two officers, and on the way told them how the heir to the barony, a naval officer, had been killed in the Dardanelles, and the old lord had died a week later.

'Rough luck!' said Oliver.

'Rough for the dead; good for the living;' and Mr Scrivens smiled amiably.

They came across Private Bulmer sitting on a box, washing out two pocket-handkerchiefs and a pair of socks in a bucket of hot water which he had obtained from the house outside which he was sitting.

'Some one from England to see you, Bulmer,' said

Vivian.

Bulmer, who had not noticed the arrival of the three, jumped up, took his pipe from his mouth with his soapy hands, and stood to attention.

'Good-morning, my lord; good-morning,' said Mr Scrivens. 'De-lighted to see you. I have come from England specially to congratulate you on your good fortune;' and Mr Scrivens seized one soapy hand.

Bulmer looked at Mr Scrivens, then at his officers; and his look clearly showed what his thoughts were.

'No, Mr Scrivens is not suffering from shell-shock or want of sleep,' said Vivian. 'He says you really have come into a peerage.'

'Yes, my lord; you are Lord Rossville.'

'Lord Rossville! But the old man and Gus! What's happened? You don't mean to say poor Gus is'—— and Bulmer stopped, as if unwilling to speak the word.

'Alas, my lord! yes,' said Mr Scrivens, turning up his eyes. 'The Honourable Augustus was killed at the Dardanelles, and the late lord died a week ago.'

'Poor old Gus!' and Bulmer sank on his box quite

dejected.

'It's a fine property, my lord, and a grand old country mansion. An old title too, with a handsome rent-roll. You will, of course, get leave, and obtain a commission—and—er—perhaps a staff job. I have all the documents ready for inspection, and'——

'Oh, shut up, man, and don't "my lord" me!' cried Bulmer angrily. 'I'm Private Bulmer here, and shall be till the end of the war, or till a Boche

gets me.'

'But, my lord, think of the risk, and of the title, you know.'

'That'll go to my young brother, who'd make a far better member of the aristocracy than I should.'

'But there's all sorts of documents to be signed, and '---

'I'll give my mother power of attorney.'

Mr Scrivens looked flabbergasted.

Vivian shook hands with the young private. 'Allow me to congratulate you, Bulmer,' he said. 'Eight thousand a year and a peerage don't come to one every day. I'll ask the Major to get you leave.'

'My congratulations also,' said Oliver, shaking hands.

'Thanks from my heart;' and Bulmer coloured with pleasure at the cordial tone of his officers. 'But it's dearly bought at the expense of my cousin's life; he was a fine fellow.'

'Your sentiments do you honour,' said Vivian, and he and Oliver went on, nodding to Mr Scrivens.

Rock, who had taken more interest in the proceedings than he had cared about showing, had strolled up in time to overhear the last part of the conversation. When his officers went on he said to Bulmer, 'So you really are a bloomin' lord, are you?'

'So I hear, Cheery.'

- 'Well, all I can say is, you don't look it. You look more like some City clerk in convict's dress.'
- 'You're not complimentary,' said Bulmer with a smile.
  - 'No, never was.'
- 'Look here! don't you be insolent to Lord Rossville,' said Mr Scrivens.
- 'Lord Fiddlesticks!' said Rock. 'He's just Private No. so-and-so, of the Wessex Fusiliers, an' I care for his title about as much as I care for you, an' that's this much;' and Rock snapped his fingers contemptuously under Mr Scrivens's nose. 'An' you'd better be movin', as the 'Uns might drop a dozen over at any moment.'
  - 'A dozen what?'
- 'Shells, you blitherin' idiot!—shells! Blow you to bits like this;' and Rock waved his arm and made a puffing noise with his mouth.
  - 'Good heavens! you don't say so?'
  - 'Fact !- An' look 'ere, Lord Dusthole-or what-

ever your go-to-party-at-home name may be—if you wants to arst a few pals to wet the new title, I'm your man. Savvy?'

'Right-o, Cheery!' and Rock walked airily away.

'What a terrible fellow!' said Mr Scrivens.

'One of the best,' corrected Private Lord Rossville. 'Reckoned by your standard, a common soldier, I suppose; by mine, a man to respect and admire.'

'Well, well, you may be right; but is there nowhere where we can have ten minutes' private

conversation, my lord?'

The young man wrung out his handkerchiefs and socks. 'Come in here,' he said wearily; 'and hurry up. We parade at two o'clock. I've got a lot to do before then.'

As they disappeared inside the house Rock cocked his eye back over his shoulder. 'They may well call us the "new army," he muttered. 'Sausage-makers for orficers; bloomin' lords as privates! 'Ow is any one to know who's who or what's what? Sooner this war's over an' we get back to the old style again the better, I say; and he wandered slowly to his quarters.

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### THE REVIEW.

THAT day found both Oliver and Vivian in command of companies—promoted captains. The mortality was so high amongst the officers that, with the exception of Captain Lloyd, made major, and given command of the regiment, there were only lieutenants left. The regiment was also ordered to parade at six next morning, and march about eleven miles to the rear, in order to take part in an inspection by his Majesty King George, who was paying a visit to his armies in the field.

'This is something of an honour,' said Oliver that night as he and Vivian were having their supper.

'Yes; but we shall make only a sorry show,' said Vivian, whose mind went back to the brilliant spectacles in which he had taken part while serving in the Guards before the war.

'It will be just a show of fighting material in fit condition,' agreed Oliver.

'What's left o' it,' muttered Rock, who was clearing away. 'Most o' the fightin' material we came out with is buried, and what ain't buried is desertin', seems to me.'

'What do you mean, you optimistic old sunbeam?' asked Vivian.

'You know that chap Wilson of A company, 'im what was always a-playin' the goat an' chaffin' an' larfin'?'

'Sunny Jim, as the men call him? Of course;

every one in the regiment knows him.'

'Well, some o' the chaps got papers this mornin' as was sent from 'ome, an' the news o' that there Zeppelin raid on London was in 'em.'

'Yes.'

- 'An' amongst the killed is this 'ere Wilson's wife an' kid.'
- 'Good gracious! Yes, I remember seeing the name now; but, of course, I never thought it would be any relation of his. What rotten luck!'
  - 'That's what 'e sez, an' 'e's bolted.'
  - 'What do you mean?' asked Oliver.
  - 'Just what I 'eard; I don't know no more.'
- 'You generally get hold of enough of a story to arouse one's curiosity, and that's all,' said Vivian. 'Go and find Sergeant Reedsdale; he'll be sure to know all about it.'

In a few minutes Reedsdale was present, and Vivian was questioning him.

'I'm afraid what you've heard is quite right, sir,' said the sergeant. 'Wilson saw in a paper which had been sent out from England that his wife and only child were killed in the last Zeppelin raid on London. At first he didn't seem to realise it; then he jumped up—he had been sitting down—gave a sort of cry as though he were being choked, turned ghastly pale, and fell down in a kind of fit. We got him on to a bed, where he lay for an hour; then I am told he took his rifle, all the ammunition he could lay hands on, and left his quarters. Since then he has not been seen.'

'Very extraordinary! Has the matter been reported to the Major?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well, we can do no more. Poor Wilson! it's hard luck to think that while he's here doing his bit these cowardly Zeppelin raiders should murder his wife and child.'

'It is hard, sir,' said Reedsdale; 'and among the men in the regiment who have relatives living on the east coast or in London there is naturally much anxiety.'

Nothing was heard of Wilson that night, and next morning he was returned as missing, and the survivors of the Wessex marched off without him. It was a miserable morning; a cold and gusty wind was blowing, and a misty rain soaked the men through. Tramp, tramp, they trudged along in the sludge, and by the time they had arrived at their destination they were fairly tired. They were halted near a small village. A mile away, in a fine meadow, the King was inspecting about ten thousand men; and, the inspection and march past being over, the men doubled off, and lined the road along which his Majesty was going to pass. As he did so, three rousing cheers greeted him.

After a brief halt in the village, the King, in a covered green motor, came slowly along towards the spot where the salute was to be taken.

'Look out!' came the word; 'they're coming;' and then came the caution, 'Steady!' as the tired men pulled themselves together.

'Shun!' cried Oliver to his company; 'slope—arms! present—arms!' and as one man the soldiers came to the 'present.'

Then the King, alighting from his car, mounted his horse, and with the young Prince of Wales, General

Plumer, who made his reputation in the Boer war, a number of khaki-clad British Divisional Generals and Brigadiers, and a group of brilliantly uniformed French and Belgian officers, he inspected the lines of mud-stained, war-worn heroes. Afterwards the men marched past in splendid form, showing that months of trench-work had not caused them to forget their ceremonial movements.

The march past over, the men formed column, and, with their bayoneted rifles at the slope, waited the word to give their monarch three cheers. Led by their officers, the men gave one tremendous, deep-throated cheer. His Majesty was just in front of the Wessex Fusiliers, and Oliver had his eyes fixed on the King, when he saw that his horse, apparently alarmed by the cheers, reared up on its hind-legs. The King, leaning forward, patted its neck, whereupon it came down on its four feet. An instant later, however, it reared higher than before, and, slipping, rolled right over. The King was underneath; there was a momentary flash of hoofs, and, horror! the King was badly kicked. A dead silence fell upon those officers and men who saw the accident. Half-a-dozen of the staff flung themselves from their horses, the King's kicking charger was dragged to its feet, and then his Majesty was seen to be lying on the ground. In a couple of seconds several officers lifted him up, and half-carried, half-led him to his car. Before any one but those quite near were aware that an accident had happened, the closed car, at full speed, followed by a crowd of galloping officers, was tearing away along the line of still cheering soldiers.

The second review thus came to a sudden end, and those who had seen the accident were looking awe-

stricken at one another, when a staff-officer came galloping along.

'Tell the men to keep quiet,' he shouted to the

officers, 'and march them away.'

This was done, the Wessex being halted about a mile from where the accident had taken place, while the other troops went on back to the trenches.

The King had intended personally to bestow the Victoria Cross upon the young Sergeant Banks, of the Coldstream Guards, who with Oliver and Vivian had won back the lost trench. The presentation was afterwards made by General Plumer, from whom it was learnt that the King's injury, though serious, was fortunately not dangerous.

Later on Oliver was passing up the village street, when an officer, trotting towards him, pulled up his horse, and cried out, 'Hallo, Hastings! I heard your regiment was here, and was wondering whether I should run across you or Drummond. How goes it?'

Oliver looked up and saw his old friend Major Dwyer.

'All right,' he replied; 'and you?'

'First-class, my boy!'

'Did you come up for the review?'

'No; I'm on special duty. I'm probably leaving France almost at once.'

'What! going home?' asked Oliver in surprise, knowing what a fire-eater the Major was.

Major Dwyer gave a knowing wink. 'No, my boy, not by a long way,' he replied.

'Where, then, if I may ask?'

'You may ask, but I can't tell you,' grinned Dwyer. Then, as if an idea had suddenly seized him, he said, 'By Jingo! now I come to think of it, you speak French like a native, don't you?'

'I've got a smattering; but I speak German better.'

'Hooray! you're just the very man! Drummond too is good at lingoes, isn't he?'

'Better than I am.'

Dwyer beckoned Oliver closer, and, bending down in the saddle, whispered, 'How would you like a trip to the East?'

'The East! Where? The Dardanelles?'

'Hush!' and the Major looked round him; 'never mention places. But would you like a trip, not perhaps devoid of—say—interest?'

'Immensely.'

'And Drummond?'

'I should say so.'

'I may be able to do something for you. Keep in your quarters to-night, and I will send you word.'

'By the way, is there any further news of his Majesty?' asked Oliver, as the Major gathered up his reins.

'Much bruised and shaken, I hear; but nothing is known for certain, except that the Prince and several doctors are with him. His Majesty has been put to bed. Now I must push on. Don't forget what I've told you; 'and the Major trotted off.

Oliver, having finished the business that he was upon, returned to the farmhouse where he was quartered. Vivian was not in; but Rock said he had only gone to see the quartermaster about the billeting of some men.

"Ow's the King, sir?" asked Rock. Oliver repeated what he had heard.

'Ah, just what you might expect. I always 'eld as 'orses was sullen, vicious brutes.'

'What makes you say that, Rock? Ever had any

experience with them?'

"Ave I not?" and Cheery Dick nodded his head vigorously.

'What was your experience?' asked Oliver, who

was often amused at Rock's tales.

'Bad, sir; very bad! It was all along o' a chap named Lewis—Beaky Lew 'e was called. Never saw such a nose in all your nat'ral, sir; more like a lobster's claw than a 'uman nose. The whole line always dressed by 'is nose. Bin in the cavalry, 'e 'ad. Bah! I 'ates 'em—all tassels an' spurs, a-lollin' about on their beastly 'orses while better men is trampin' on their own feet. An' swank, too; lor', it's more than any decent man 'u'd believe, the swank o' the or'nary 'orse-sojer;' and Rock sniffed contemptuously.

'But what about your experience with horses?'

- 'I'm comin' to that. This 'ere Beaky Lew got corporal, an' gave 'imself no end o' airs. Me an' 'im came up agin' one another once or twice, an' 'e'd 'ave put me on the peg several times if I 'adn't bin servant to Captain Goodhart, an' so out o' his clutches.'
  - 'Put you on the peg?' queried Oliver.
  - 'Yes, sir; run me in the guardroom.'

'Oh, I see.'

'Well, one day I 'as me nibs. I catches 'im in the town comin' out o' a boozer while 'e was on duty.'

'Boozer being a public-house, I presume?'

'You've guessed it, sir. Well, that cost 'im dear. 'E'd got to be civil to me after that, because if I'd opened my mouth on 'im 'e'd 'ave found 'imself a

full private again soon, 'cos there was no nonsense in the Fightin' Fifth. Well, we 'ad many a pint together.'

'Which he paid for, I suppose?'

'Most generally. He wasn't a mean sort o' chap;' and Rock wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. 'Well, one day 'e got nabbed gettin' a drink from the sergeants' mess afore twelve in the mornin', an' 'e gets a wheel afore the Colonel an' gets broke. 'E put it down to me blabbin' on 'im; but I never did, though 'e treasured up a grudge agin' me.'

'But how about the horses, Rock?'

'I'm a-goin' to tell you. It's soon after this as the army goes fair mad over this 'ere mounted infantry business. Bah, bally rot! Anyway, our Colonel was full o' it. Beaky Lew, after 'e was broke, got a transfer, an' disappeared, an' I forgot all about 'im. It was about twelve months later when Captain Goodhart an' me 'ad a slight disagreement, an' 'e went on leave. I—er—just for a change, went back to reg'mental dooty, and as the result o' a bit o' a' accident got up before the Colonel.'

'Accident not unconnected with the canteen per-

haps,' suggested Oliver.

'Nothin' o' the sort, sir. I got mixed up with a debatin' society, that's all. Well, the Colonel always was a bit funny, an' 'e says I 'ad a disturbin' influence on the recruits, an' a month or two away from the reg'ment 'u'd do me good; an', thinkin' 'e was goin' to send me on some detachment dooty, I quite agrees; when 'e ups an' says 'e'd send me to Aldershot with the next Mounted Infantry squad. I told 'im I fair 'ated 'orses; but no good! Away I 'as to go. The very first man I see when we marched up to the

M.I. quarters was Beaky Lew, an' a full corporal, too. I knew I was in for a bad time; but I pretended not to notice 'im, nor 'im me, but I sees 'is eyes twinkle each side that Punch's nose. Well, the next mornin' we goes into the ridin' school, an' Beaky was in charge.

"E pretends to be surprised when 'e sees me, an'

says, "'Allo, Rock; fancy you bein' 'ere!"

'We'd brought the 'orses from the stable, an' I 'ad a' old-lookin' beast; but Beaky says, "'Ere, Rock, you take this 'orse," an' points to one as another man 'ad. An' 'e was an 'orrible beast—great black 'ead an' two eyes what looked red, an' all the time a-tossin' his 'ead up an' down.'

'Showing he was pleased to see you, Rock.'

'So I should think. We was told 'ow to stand in front o' the 'orses, with a rein in each 'and, an' first thing the 'orse does is to chuck up 'is 'ead an' nearly knock me over. I jumps back, still grabbin' the reins, an' the 'orse steps forward an' 'its me on the side o' the foot with 'is 'oof.

'Beaky Lew comes blindin' along an' asks 'ow I dare move. I was too old a soldier to get chewin' the rag to 'im, but I just thought a few things. Then we 'ad to mount, an' every time I tried to put my foot up that beast goes backin' away, an' Beaky Lew cussin' me somethin' 'orrible. At last I gets on, an' we walks round the school. That was all right till we tried a trot; then I thought my 'ead would be jolted off. "'Old 'ard!" I shouts, an' pulls the 'orse's 'ead.

"Ow dare you talk in the school?" shouts Beaky.
"Do you think you're drivin' a cab? Keep your 'eels down, an' let 'is 'ead alone," or some such bally

rot. 'Owever, I'd 'ad enough, an' I told 'im so. 'Ow I ever got through the hour I don't know, but at last it was over, an' we was dismissed.

"'Ow are you gettin' on, Rock?" Beaky asks when we was in the stable.

"Oh, I dare say I shall do in time," I answers.

"I dare say you will," 'e says, silky like. "It ain't more than 20 per cent. what gets badly 'urt, an' not more than 10 per cent. gets killed, in the school."

'I was real ill for a day after that first ride, but the second was worse. A chap 'ad given me a wrinkle 'ow to keep on; but the beast I was ridin' kept rushin' away an' a-bitin' at the 'orse's tail in front o' 'im, an' when I pulled 'im in 'e either kicks out or stands stock-still, an' Beaky Lew was cussin' me all the time. After one o' these 'ere rushes the 'orse stuck still an' wouldn't move, an' Beaky cut 'im with 'is whip, when off 'e goes, kicks at another 'orse, chucks me off, an' lands me on the arm. I made up my mind I'd done with ridin', an' lay still, an' wouldn't move. So they carried me to 'orspital, an' there I stuck seven weeks, an' I'd a-bin there now afore I'd ha' done any more ridin'.'

'How did you get out of it, Rock?'

'Oh, I just waited till Captain Goodhart came back, an' then I wrote to 'im, an' 'e come an' see me. O' course 'e couldn't do without me, an' as I wasn't likely to make a good mounted infantryman, I was dismissed from the squad, an' went back to my old job as 'is servant.'

'And what about Beaky Lew?'

'Poor old Beaky! 'E got sergeant, an' went out with the M.I. to the Boer war. 'E was killed at Sanna's Post, an' I carved 'is name on a nice little

cross;' and Cheery Dick shook his head sadly. 'An' now, sir, you know why I 'ate 'orses.'

'Hate horses, do you?' exclaimed Vivian, entering at that moment. 'Mind you never have to eat them.'

'I've 'ad to do that afore now,' said Cheery Dick; 'but that tale will do for another time.'

Oliver told Vivian what Major Dwyer had said, and Vivian and he made various conjectures as to what was taking the Major to the East. Later that evening a motor-car stopped at the door, and a R.E. man entered with a letter addressed to Oliver. The note ran:

'Come along with bearer to headquarters. Bring Captain Drummond.—Ys. in haste,

'TERENCE DWYER.'

'By Jove! I wonder what's up?' exclaimed Vivian excitedly.

'Come with me, and we'll soon see,' replied Oliver; and five minutes later they were speeding away in a car on their way to headquarters.

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### A SPECIAL MISSION.

OLIVER and Vivian were soon at the small and unpretentious villa in which Sir John French had his quarters. As the car pulled up Major Dwyer met them and took them inside to a small room, in which several aides-de-camp and various staff-officers were sitting or standing about.

'Sir John is busy just at present,' Dwyer explained, 'but he'll see us directly. It will be no good my saying anything about what's on, as he will explain all, and you don't want to go over the ground twice.'

'You might give us a hint of the business,' said

Oliver.

'It's simply a trip out to Serbia, and your know-ledge of languages will be most handy. You know it's my weak point; but I'm strong on guns. A couple of staff-officers should go with me, and I recommended you.'

'But we're not staff-officers.'

'That can be remedied in two minutes.'

Soon an orderly officer came out, and, addressing Dwyer, said, 'Sir John is ready to see you, Major. Are these the officers you spoke of?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Come along, then;' and in a moment they were all in the Commander-in-Chief's room.

Sir John sat at a large table covered with maps and papers; on his left was his Chief of Staff, Sir Douglas Haig. As the officers entered Sir John

looked up.

'Ah!' he said, 'I seldom forget names, and never faces. I remember you both quite well. You went with Major Bishop from Landrecies to General Fleurot at Avesnes. You'd been serving with the Belgians.'

'Quite right, Sir John,' replied Vivian.

'You're Drummond of the Coldstreamers; and this young man—let me see—Hastings, are you not?'

'Yes, Sir John.'

'Still lieutenants?' looking at the two stars on their cuffs, for they had had no opportunity of adding the third.

'Captains, Sir John.'

'Ah, just made, I suppose. This is a young man's war.'

He spoke a few words quietly to Sir Douglas Haig, then motioned Oliver, Vivian, and Major Dwyer, who had been standing, to sit down. He was silent for a few moments, and, as is his wont, seemed to be communing with himself. Then, looking towards the young officers, though he still seemed in a reverie, he said, 'It has become necessary, in view of the recent development of affairs in the Balkans, to send a trusty messenger to Admiral Troubridge, who has been on special service in Serbia for some months. The Home Government received certain information, and made proposals which it is impossible for me to carry out. But unless Admiral Troubridge knows that I am not carrying out these proposals, which he has been informed that I shall do, it may lead to very unpleasant consequences. Do you follow me so far?'

Oliver and Vivian replied in the affirmative.

'Very well. Now, I am in possession of some facts about the Balkan business which I doubt whether even the Foreign Secretary knows, and I am acting on that information. Briefly, Armenia is wiped out; Montenegro is knocked out; Serbia is doomed. This time Germany and Austria are determined to over-run the country, and Belgium teaches us what that means. Ferdinand of Bulgaria, a mere tool of the Kaiser, has betrayed Russia and thrown in his lot with Germany. He will invade Serbia from the east, and, so far as I can see, nothing can save the country. France and Britain, no matter how willing they may be to help Serbia, will, I am afraid, be too late.' Here Sir John sighed. 'And there's no saying in the least,' he went on, 'what effect this may have on our other operations. The Greek king is governed by his wife, a German, and were it not for the will of the people would join the Central Powers to-morrow. In any case, we must be prepared. Then Roumania, although distinctly favourable to us, must after all look to herself; and if Serbia is sacrificed she may think her turn will come next, and may be dragooned into joining the Central Powers. So you see it's a very difficult and complicated problem.'

Some further talk on the subject followed, and then Sir John said, 'The situation which may be created will not be one that can be dealt with in a cut-and-dried fashion. The men on the spot must know how much—or how little—they can expect from us, and must be able to act at once. I shall send letters, of course in cipher, to Admiral Troubridge and General Sir B. Mahon. You can supplement them from your own knowledge; and being,

as I know, capable and resourceful men, may be very useful in case of their being in a tight corner. Major Dwyer goes out to lend a hand to Admiral Troubridge with the guns—not that we can teach naval men anything about gunnery, but I am afraid the situation ahead of us is one that will demand a knowledge of the best way to transport guns rapidly across awkward country rather than how to use them on the enemy. In that respect Major Dwyer's experience will be invaluable. Now, such is the mission. Will you undertake it?'

Both officers said they would be delighted, on which Sir John told Sir Douglas Haig to make the necessary arrangements, and bade Oliver and Vivian be back at headquarters by seven o'clock in the morning.

Sir Douglas Haig went into an adjoining room with the three officers.

'You're dashed lucky fellows!' he said, 'and, I can tell you, ought to feel yourselves highly honoured at being entrusted with this mission by Sir John. He is very particular whom he employs, and you can take it from me that he has to feel perfectly assured he can implicitly trust any one before he employs him.'

'We do feel honoured, I'm sure,' said Vivian.

'A pleasant rest and change of scenery, a charming trip with just a dash of danger to make it exciting! And now let me warn you; be well armed, trust no strangers, and beware of spies. They are the curse of this campaign; everything we do or say or even think of seems known to the enemy. How they get their knowledge entirely puzzles us; we have had the best detectives from home over here, but they cannot find out how the news leaks out. We only

know that it does, and some of our best thought-out plans have been ruined through being betrayed. You will carry news and instructions of the very greatest importance, news which would be of tremendous use to the enemy, and which he would stick at nothing to obtain. So be on your guard, and take no risks.'

'Trust us for that, Sir Douglas,' said Major Dwyer.
'My two young comrades here are as slippery as eels, and I'm as wary as a fox. The Huns will have

to be very smart who get over us.'

'They may not be Huns; they may be Turks or Greeks or Russians; even Englishmen!' said Sir Douglas Haig pointedly. 'Trust no one.' He gave Vivian a letter for Major Lloyd explaining affairs.

'I expect the Major won't like this, Sir Douglas,' said Oliver; 'to take two out of his four officers will

be very awkward.'

'I made inquiries before you came over this evening. Your regiment is going right to the rear for drill and reorganisation. There is a strong draft with several officers, some old ones who have been wounded and have now rejoined, at St Quentin, and the regiment will be moved there to-morrow.'

'I'm glad of that, for I shouldn't like to miss any work the battalion might be called upon to do. I've been with it since it left England.'

'And will very likely be back again in France before it goes into the trenches again.'

Major Dwyer was staying at headquarters, and Oliver, Vivian, and he stood together for a few moments talking outside, Dwyer being in the best of spirits. 'It's just the luckiest beggars in France we are,' he said as he shook hands with them. 'We'll run on to Paris to-morrow just to make

ourselves decent again. Then we'll have the trip of our lives. If we don't enjoy ourselves we deserve to be miserable.'

As Oliver and Vivian got in the car the former thought he saw a man start from the shadow and make off in the opposite direction. 'I wonder who that was?' he said to Vivian. 'Seemed to be lurking in the dark.'

'Oh, probably one of our chaps.'

'Perhaps so, but you never know. I must warn Dwyer about talking so loudly;' and the subject was

dropped.

Rock met them on their return, and, with that peculiar knack he had, looked at them both as though endeavouring to find out what they had been doing.

'By Jove! I forgot Rock,' said Oliver. 'I expect

he'll have something to say about this business.'

'And won't like losing us. I wonder what the Major will do with him.'

'Goodness knows. We'll tell him we're going, and

see what he says.'

'Goin' east, gentlemen,' he answered lightly. 'Well, it's got to be thunderin' bad there to be as bad as it is west, an' I always did like 'ot climates. I'd sooner sojer out east than anywhere.'

'But I'm afraid you won't go, Rock.'

The old man, who was just going out of the room, stood with his hand on the door. 'I don't know what you'd a' done out 'ere without me,' he said; 'but out east, pooh!—you'd be simply lost. If you go east, I go too.'

'But we're going on a secret mission, Rock.'

'I don't want to know nothin' about the mission.

Never did 'old with 'em myself; only upset the natives.'

'It's not the sort of mission you're thinking of.'

'No matter, you're a-goin' to take baggage o' some sort, I suppose.'

'Yes.'

'Very well then, I go as baggage;' and Rock walked off.

'Upon my word, I'd sooner take the old scoundrel than leave him behind,' said Vivian.

'But you were angry with me, if I remember rightly, when I first suggested taking him as a servant.'

'The old man's proved his merit since then. He's a soldier, anyway.'

'Let's see what the Major says about it;' and, taking Sir Douglas Haig's letter, they found their commanding officer.

'I say, this is some cool, taking my two best officers,' said Major Lloyd.

Oliver told him what Sir Douglas had said about the regiment going to a base camp. 'Well, of course, if Sir John wants you, you must go; but if you do go, for heaven's sake take that old Rock with you. You're the only people who can do anything with him. He'd upset the whole regiment.'

The next morning Oliver received a brief note from Skinner, saying that Colonel Hastings was improving, and that it was hoped he would soon be able to be moved to a base hospital. The good news put both him and Vivian in the best of spirits.

Rock accompanied his two masters to headquarters, and Major Dwyer thought it would be a good idea to take a reliable servant with them. 'We may as well

make ourselves comfortable on the journey,' he said, 'and the man looks one of the right sort, the old long-service man.'

'Oh, he's all right,' said Oliver.

'When you know him,' added Vivian.

'Which is more than can be said of some people, for the better you know them the less right they are.'

Sir Douglas Haig thought that it was a good idea to have a sharp, reliable servant with them, and presently their letters were given them, together with their final instructions, and Sir John French, shaking hands with them, wished them God-speed.

Rock had made up his mind from the first that he was going to be of the party, and expressed no surprise when he was told he was going. A visit to the paymaster for money had to be made, and then, in a sixty horse-power car, away they went to Paris.

# CHAPTER XXXV.

#### ROCK PROVES HIS WORTH.

PARIS seemed to appeal to Private Rock. He was frankly pleased with it. Shops and streets, a real big river and bridges, trees and arches and monuments! 'Fair civilised,' he confided to Oliver, beside whom he sat. 'A few more people about, fewer closed shops, more traffic in the streets, an' a—er—public-'ouse 'ere an' there, just to liven it up a bit; an' then, why, you could almost fancy yourself in Oxford Street or on the Embankment.'

The officers had a good deal to do in Paris. Ward-robes had to be very largely replenished, trunks bought, a few of the little luxuries of life, such as slippers, towels, books, and so on, procured; and then the luxury of a bath and a hair-cut, followed by a

good lunch, made them feel different beings.

They went for a stroll afterwards, Rock a few steps behind. To the officers, who knew Paris well, the changes wrought by the war were in sad evidence; but the people seemed in good spirits; and, going with a stream of laughing, chattering Parisians, the officers reached the Invalides, where the great attraction was found to be the guns recently captured from the Germans. There were guns of fifty-seven, seventy-seven, and one hundred and fifty mm., great howitzers and mortars, mitrailleuses, minenwerfers, searchlights, and trophies of all sorts. The guns numbered nearly one hundred, and aroused the greatest enthusiasm.

'Here we see some of the fruits of the fighting,' said Oliver. 'It cheers one up, and makes one feel one hasn't fought in vain.'

The British uniforms and speech attracted the attention of the Parisians, and smiles, greetings, and occasionally handshakes were bestowed upon the officers, who sometimes found the attentions to which they were subjected a little trying.

They were just moving away from the Invalides when Rock, who had been looking at the people more than at the guns, touched Oliver gently on the arm. 'Don't look round suddenly, sir,' he whispered, 'but notice presently that old man on your right front. 'E's been following us for some time, an' I'm sure 'e tried to catch what you were talking about.'

'Right!' said Oliver, and presently, turning round in a casual way, he saw an old man, with a closecropped white beard, wearing a soft felt hat and smoke-coloured glasses, standing a little way from them, apparently looking at the guns.

'Keep an eye on him, Rock,' whispered Oliver, giving his two companions the signal. They all lit cigarettes, talked and laughed, and walked off as

though they hadn't a care in the world.

Arrived at the hotel, Oliver said to Rock, 'Well, what happened? Did the old man follow us?'

'Yes. I saw 'im several times, an' 'e spoke to two others. When 'e saw me lookin' at 'im 'e disappeared down a side street; but I'm sure one of the others watched us in 'ere.'

'Splendid, Rock! You're quite a detective;' and Oliver talked the matter over with his companions.

'It seems as if we were followed,' said Vivian, 'and my experience of German methods warns me to be

careful. We must also remember what Sir Douglas said. Let's be on our guard, and keep our pistols handy.'

Major Dwyer, who rather prided himself on his knowledge of gastronomic matters, ordered an excellent dinner; and, as they wanted to talk freely among themselves, Rock received the dishes and waited upon them.

They had a most excellent repast, and then Oliver said, 'Now, Rock, you go and get a good feed, and wash it down with a bottle of wine. But only one, remember.'

'Yes, sir.'

'And tell our waiter, who speaks English quite well, to bring coffee.'

'Yes, sir;' and Rock departed.

Dwyer produced his cigar-case, and presently the waiter brought in the silver coffee and milk pots, and after mixing the beverage according to the taste of the diners, retired. Dwyer was full of fun, and was spinning all sorts of racy anecdotes, which kept Oliver and Vivian continually chuckling, until a very funny story about a brigade major under whom he had once served put them in a roar of laughter.

'You'll kill me, major,' said Vivian, as he ceased laughing; and, picking up his cup, was about to sip his coffee when Rock dashed into the room, literally hurled himself across it, and knocked the cup from Vivian's hand. It went flying across the room, struck against the door, and broke, the contents spilling all over the place.

Vivian, his face flushing crimson, rose to his feet.

'Private Rock,' he said in quiet tones, though there

was a vibrant note of anger in his voice, 'what is the meaning of this outrageous conduct?'

Rock, pale and agitated, stood before the three officers. 'Ave any of you gentlemen tasted the cawfee?' he asked.

'Answer my question!' demanded Vivian sternly.

'For Gawd's sake, sir, answer mine!' insisted Rock.

Oliver, seeing that the old soldier was in deadly earnest, said, 'I have not tasted mine; neither have you, Dwyer, have you?'

'No.'

'Nor I,' said Vivian; 'but I demand an explanation of Rock's conduct.'

'Which is simple, sir. The cawfee is poisoned.'

'What?' cried Oliver. 'Explain yourself, Rock.'

'Certainly, sir. After I told the waiter chap about the cawfee, I was thinkin' o' gettin' my snack; an', not likin' to ask these 'ere waiters, who seem so almighty sidey, I goes down below to see if I could fix my scoff up in the kitchen. I was nosin' about downstairs, quietly like, when I sees that chap in the dark glasses sneakin' along a passage. I 'id myself to see what 'is little game was, when I sees 'im in the kitchen a-talkin' to the cook feller. 'E 'ands 'im something an' disappears, an' then I sees the cook take the cawfee-pot an' pop into it something out of a bit o' white paper. 'E then puts the things on a tray, an' the chap in the glasses went out of a side door. I followed 'im, an' found 'e'd gone up the area an' into the street. I nipped after 'im an' 'e 'ears me, an' takes to 'is 'eels, an' runs like mad. I shouted out for some one to stop 'im; but, not knowin' their lingo, no one takes any notice, an' 'e

gets away down a side street. Then like lightnin' it flashes on my mind that it was your cawfee, an' that that 'ere stuff in the paper was poison. Back I tears, an' gets in just in time to catch you a-goin' to drink.'

The three officers cross-questioned Rock, but he stuck to his story in every detail.

'There's certainly something in this,' said Oliver, 'and it's quite simple to put the matter to the test. Could you swear to the man who put the powder in the coffee, Rock?'

'Pick 'im out of a thousand, sir.'

'Very well then, hide yourself behind that curtain. I shall send for the *chef*; if he's the man who put the powder in the coffee, Rock, just cough slightly.— Now, Vivian, kindly ring the bell, and leave the rest to me.'

Vivian did as he was bidden, and the waiter appeared.

'We have enjoyed a very good dinner,' said Oliver, 'well cooked and well served. We should like to thank the *chef* and the proprietor; kindly ask them to spare us a few minutes.'

'Yes, monsieur;' and the waiter hurried away.

In three minutes the proprietor, a Frenchman of pronounced type, all smiles, appeared; and while Oliver was making a complimentary speech the *chef* knocked at the door, and was bidden to enter. He was a stout, dark man, with a well-waxed moustache.

No sooner had he entered the room than two stentorian coughs sounded from behind the curtain.

'Good-evening,' said Vivian.

'Good-evening, messieurs,' replied the chef.

At the first sound of his voice Oliver suspected that he was not a pure-bred Frenchman.

'You are not a Parisian, I think.'

- 'No, monsieur, I am Swiss;' and the three officers noticed that while he spoke he gave them a rapid glance, and then looked at the coffee, still untasted in the cups.
  - 'German-Swiss?' asked Oliver.
  - 'No, monsieur; from Geneva.'
  - 'H'm! Your cooking does you credit.'
  - 'Thank you, monsieur.'
  - 'And I wish to thank you.'

The *chef* bowed.

- 'Rock, guard the door,' said Oliver in English; and as the soldier emerged from his hiding-place and walked stolidly across to the door, which he locked, putting the key in his pocket, the *chef* turned pale.
- 'It is a curious custom of mine that when I have thoroughly enjoyed a dinner,' continued Oliver in French, 'I always ask the *chef* to take a cup of coffee with me.'
- 'Pardon, monsieur, I never take coffee. It is poison to me.'
- 'Indeed,' replied Oliver dryly, 'that is strange. I had an idea this beverage which you so carefully prepared would be poison to us too.'

The chef turned paler still. 'Monsieur jokes,' he said.

'I was never farther from joking in my life. Now, drink this cup of coffee,' and Oliver pushed a small cup of the black coffee towards him.

'I cannot, monsieur.'

'I must insist.'

'And I must refuse.'

Oliver drew an automatic pistol from the sidepocket of his tunic. 'You will drink that cup of coffee before I count ten,' he said, 'or I shall be under the painful necessity of shooting you. I am not always a sure shot, and I might have to shoot several times before I kill you. It will be easier for you to drink the coffee.'

The man grew angry, and, turning to the proprietor, said, 'Monsieur, am I to be bullied and threatened thus by English officers who have taken too much wine?'

The proprietor looked in astonishment from one to the other. 'What is the meaning of this extra-ordinary conduct?' he asked.

Oliver in a few words explained. The proprietor's face grew grave. The *chef* declared that the whole tale was a pure fabrication, and no stranger had been in the kitchen that evening.

'This man has been with me three years,' said the proprietor; 'and he has always given me satisfaction. True, when the Zeppelins raided Paris it was stated that lights were signalled from the roof, and Louis fell under suspicion.'

'But I was acquitted, monsieur,' said the chef.

'Yes, nothing could be proved against you. But you said just now that you never drank coffee. That is a falsehood. You are very fond of it.'

Louis hung his head.

'That settles it,' said Oliver. 'You'll drink this coffee or be shot.'

'Drink it, Louis,' said the proprietor; 'if it is all right, as you say, it cannot hurt you.'

'I will not,' replied Louis.

Oliver began to count, when the proprietor interposed. 'Gentlemen,' he said, 'if you shoot this man in my hotel it will make a scandal, and in these days one cannot afford to have the least breath of suspicion against one. I have staying in the hotel Lieutenant Marcel, of the provost-major's staff. Let us call him, and hand the affair over to him. I can assure you he will see justice done.'

Oliver explained the matter to Dwyer, who could only imperfectly follow what had been said. He at once agreed, and in two minutes a debonair young lieutenant, in immaculate uniform, joined them. He saluted the three British officers punctiliously, and then inquired in what way he could serve them. The position was explained, and his handsome face grew stern.

'Messieurs,' he said, 'I am sorry you should have been annoyed thus. The matter is simplicity itself. This Louis has come under suspicion before. We have a short way with spies and traitors in Paris. The man shall be arrested and the coffee analysed. If there is poison in it, Monsieur Louis will never see another sunset;' and he shrugged his shoulders. He scribbled a few lines on the back of a card, which he handed to the proprietor, and in a few minutes two soldiers appeared and marched Louis off between them. Another poured the coffee back into the pot, and took charge of it.

Lieutenant Marcel passed his cigarette-case round, shook hands with the officers, and asked if they were staying in Paris.

'No, we leave to-night for Brindisi,' said Oliver.

'Indeed! Then I wish you bon voyage. A telegram would reach you to-morrow at Bologna?'

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'I believe so.'

'To whom should I address it.'

'Oh, to Major Dwyer, Royal Artillery, our senior.'

Lieutenant Marcel again saluted, and took his departure, while the proprietor expressed his regret at the untoward incident.

'My dear sir, it is no fault of yours. If this Louis is in the pay of Germany, which I quite expect, he would naturally always be on the lookout not to be discovered. Germany does not employ fools.'

'In the pay of Germany!' cried the proprietor angrily. 'If he is— Well, well, I know Lieutenant

Marcel. It will go hard with Monsieur Louis.'

'Well, I'm hanged!' said Major Dwyer when the proprietor had departed. 'Who'd have thought of this?'

'It shows that we are watched, and our mission is

going to be balked if possible,' said Oliver.

'And, Rock, I owe you an apology,' said Vivian, handing the old soldier a twenty-franc note. 'You are a jewel, and I fancy we all owe you our lives.'

'By Jove! I believe we do,' agreed Dwyer.

Rock folded and pocketed the note. 'Some day you'll find out what 'elpless babes you are without me,' he said. 'But why didn't you shoot the blighter, Mr Hastings?'

'I didn't want the beggar's blood on my hands, though I would have shot him if the proprietor hadn't interfered.'

'Never draw a gun unless you mean to use it, sir,' said Rock, shaking his head. 'I lost a good pal once through that; but it's a long story.'

'You shall spin it in the train, Rock,' said Vivian; and that reminds me, time is getting on. Our train

is eight forty-five, I think, so you'd better get your dinner, Rock, and you shall eat it here.'

An hour later they boarded the southern express, securing a sleeping-car for themselves, and a small separate compartment for Rock and their luggage, which was very little, next to them. There were a good many people travelling by the train, and the officers looked at the well-dressed crowd with interest.

All being at last in their places, away they went. Oliver and his companions were in high spirits; and, forgetting the incident of Monsieur Louis, determined to enjoy the trip as only those who have been for months on active service can.

### CHAPTER XXXVI.

#### OLIVER HAS A NARROW ESCAPE.

OLIVER turned into his bunk with a sigh of relief, determined to enjoy ten hours' good sleep. It was delicious to lie on a soft mattress covered with warm blankets after his months of trench-life. But despite feeling very tired, he slept badly, and was troubled with uneasy dreams. He could not get out of his mind the incident of the poisoned coffee, and in his sleep fancied that the man in the smoke-coloured glasses was mixing prussic acid with coffee, and after the usual 'stand to' in the trenches was compelling the whole platoon to drink it, and they were falling down man by man as they did so.

He awoke with a start, and thought he heard a crash in the compartment occupied by Rock. Full of apprehension, he slipped from his bunk, and in his sock-covered feet crept into Cheery's compartment. The carriage lamp was dimmed with a blue cover, and for a moment he could distinguish nothing; then he saw a sight that fully aroused him.

On his knees, before a small leather suit-case which Oliver had bought the day before in Paris, was the man in the smoke-coloured glasses. He had ripped open the case with a big clasp-knife, which lay on the ground beside him, and was turning over the contents as though searching for something.

'Hallo, you scoundrel!' cried Oliver, 'what are you doing?'

Quick as lightning the man turned, whipped a pistol from his pocket, and pointed it at Oliver. 'Utter a sound,' he hissed, 'and you are a dead man!'

Something in the man's voice sounded familiar, and, the smoke-coloured glasses falling off at the same moment, Oliver recognised him. 'Löffel!' he

gasped.

'Fool, you have sealed your doom!' and there was a flash, a bang, and a bullet chipped Oliver's ear. He staggered back at the same instant as a heavy boot, hurled by Rock, who had suddenly awoke, flew across the compartment and struck Löffel on the wrist, knocking the pistol from his hand. With a snarl he leapt to his feet, and, pushing Oliver backward, dashed down the corridor. Recovering himself, Oliver followed, until, on throwing open a door of communication, he ran into the arms of one of the conductors, who held him firmly.

'Let me go, idiot!' cried Oliver.

'Are you mad, monsieur? What is the matter?'

'A man shot at me, and ran along here.'

The conductor looked incredulous, and, some other passengers coming from their compartments, a great confusion arose. At the same time the train began to slow down. Oliver pushed his way from the chattering passengers, and ran along the corridor until he came to an open door, at which stood a Frenchman in pyjamas.

- 'What is the matter, monsieur?' asked the latter.
- 'I am after a man who shot at me.'
- 'A gray-bearded man?'

'Yes.'

'He opened this door and went on to the footboard.' In an instant Oliver had followed, and, holding the side-rail, was working his way along the footboard too. The speed was slackening rapidly, and the train had almost stopped before, at grave danger of breaking his neck, Oliver had reached the engine. But no Löffel could be seen.

The train came to a standstill, and the enginedriver, looking in surprise at Oliver, asked if it was he who had pulled the alarm cord and stopped the train.

'No, it must have been the man I was after,' replied Oliver in vexed tones.

The chief conductor came up to the engine, and explanations had to be given. They both returned to the train, and Dwyer and Vivian joining Oliver, he explained what had happened.

'Löffel is as cunning as Satan,' said Vivian. 'It is clear he stopped the train, and then jumped off the footboard, and is now a mile behind. We should

certainly never find him.'

As they were then running through a dense forest, and it was pitch dark, the truth of Vivian's remark was evident, and the train continued on its way. The chief conductor examined the cut suit-case, took voluminous notes, and searched the train from end to end; but no Löffel was found. It was learnt that he had occupied a carriage with another passenger, who said he had not exchanged a word with him. He had been asleep, and had not noticed Löffel leave the apartment. One conductor saw him passing along the corridor; but, as he was fully dressed, he had taken no notice of him. The officers, not wishing to make the object of their journey public,

pretended that the attempt was one of simple robbery, and so the matter ended.

They discussed the affair amongst themselves.

'It is clear that the scoundrel was after our despatches,' said Oliver, 'and thought the suit-case the most likely place to find them, as we had no despatch-case.'

'Do you think it really was Löffel?' asked Vivian.

'I could swear it.'

'Then we must be doubly on our guard, for he's a most dangerous scoundrel. He's slipped through our hands once more; but we must keep a sharp lookout for him in future.'

'If he hasn't broken his neck,' said Dwyer.

'Not he; he's all right somewhere, depend on it.'

Rock could throw no light on the affair. The noise of talking had awakened him, and he had seen the gray-bearded man on his knees with a pistol in his hand. 'I recognised 'im at once,' he said, 'an' shied the only thing I 'ad at 'and at 'is blinkin' 'ead.'

They all returned to their bunks, and nothing further happened. While they were at Bologna, in the afternoon of that day a telegraph-messenger boarded the train with a telegram for Major Dwyer. He tore open the envelope, and, reading the contents, passed it to Vivian. 'Put it into English,' he said.

'The coffee was poisoned. Monsieur Louis was shot at ten o'clock.—MARCEL.'

'Short, and to the point,' said Oliver.

'And we must not forget to reward your servant for his watchfulness,' said Dwyer. 'That man is a jewel.' The rest of the journey was without hindrance. It was a pleasant trip all down the coast of Italy, and at Brindisi a steamer was secured for Salonika, which port, after an uneventful run, was safely reached.

# CHAPTER XXXVII.

### A BRUSH WITH BRIGANDS.

BY Jove, what a scene!' cried Major Dwyer, as the steamer came to anchor in the bay of Salonika. It was early morning, bright and sunny, but already rather cold.

Oliver and Vivian looked at the picturesque city, topped by its ancient citadel. It was a town full of interest, and both of them would have liked a day or two to explore; but they knew that once ashore they would immediately be in harness again, and would probably spend only a short time in Salonika.

Hundreds of tents were to be seen as they landed, and British Tommies, French Poilus, Greeks, Jews, Serbians, Montenegrins—indeed, men of almost every

nationality-formed a motley crowd.

Hardly had they landed when a young staff-captain named Strachan took them in tow; and, learning that they had letters for the officer commanding the British troops at Salonika, undertook to conduct them to him.

'We're a bit early yet,' he said. 'If you haven't breakfasted, will you favour me with your company?'

'Delighted,' said Dwyer.

'Are you straight from England?' asked Strachan.

'No; from France,' replied Dwyer.

'Indeed, then I shall be more delighted than ever with your company. I'm dying to hear some authentic news; we get very little here.'

Captain Strachan was able to provide a very good breakfast, during which he asked numberless questions about the position in France.

'And now, captain,' said Vivian, after explaining the position when they left the trenches, 'what of things here?'

'As bad as they can be. I don't hold any brief for the Serbians, for I sometimes think that among these Balkan nations it's six of one and half-a-dozen of the other. But Serbia's most bitter enemy must be sorry for her now. You know, of course, that Greece, who promised Serbia everything, has given her nothing but the cold shoulder, and Bulgaria has joined in against her. Acting on the most approved German methods, Bulgaria invaded Serbia several days before she declared war, so as to get a good start. The Austro-Germans are commanded by Von Mackensen, one of the Kaiser's cleverest Generals, and they and the Bulgarians outnumber the Serbians three to one in men and ten to one in guns.'

'It's all up with Serbia then?'

'Absolutely. Belgrade fell on the 8th, and the Serbians retreated, and are now, I believe, at Nish. The latest is that the enemy has cut the railway between Nish and the south.'

'But what about the British force? How many are there, and where is it?'

'There are not more than thirteen thousand under Sir Brian Mahon, and they are just north of Lake Doiran; the French are a bit farther ahead, at Strumnitza, and are about double the British strength. They are absolutely powerless in point of numbers to undertake any serious operation against the enemy, and all they can hope to do is to prevent the Bul-

garians getting across the southern war-area and entirely cutting off the Serbian retreat.'

'By Jove! not a very cheerful lookout,' said Dwyer.
'I have to get up to Admiral Troubridge. Do you know where he is, and what sort of a chance I've got of finding him?'

'He was with his guns at Belgrade, and we heard he had succeeded in saving most of them in his retreat; but what's happened since we don't know.'

Breakfast being finished, Captain Strachan took them along to General Wilson, who was in command at Salonika.

There was much of interest to be seen in the streets, but there was no time to give more than a passing glance, and they were soon at the General's quarters.

That officer received them very cordially, deciphered his letters, and looked very grave at the contents. The information you bring is of the greatest importance to General Mahon, he said. You will have to proceed at once to his camp. Major Dwyer, I understand, is to join Admiral Troubridge, though whether he will be able to get through is another matter. Since Sir John French dictated his despatch events have moved rapidly here, and the situation is much worse.

'I'll have a try to get through, General,' said Dwyer.

'And you may succeed. I am only telling you how

matters stand to put you on your guard.'

In about an hour's time the General had his letters ready. 'You seem to have made yourselves at home with Captain Strachan,' he said, 'and you could not have a better guide to General Mahon than he.—You,

gentlemen,' to Oliver and Vivian, 'are apparently to accompany Major Dwyer, and I wish you all God-speed and a safe return.'

The whole party left Salonika by rail, and were soon climbing the heights. The scenery, as they slowly puffed along, for the train was heavily laden with munitions, was a grand one. Mountain peaks towered up on each side of them, and when they got round the curve to Arapli they could see the town and harbour of Salonika behind them, with the blue sea rippling in the sunlight beyond that. Then, higher among the mountains, they caught glimpses of the Krusha Balkan range, with the snow-topped Belashitza mountains beyond that.

About midday they reached Doiran Station, just south of the great lake of the same name, and here they alighted. British Tommies were everywhere, laughing and joking, and just as much at home as in France. Huge heaps of stores were to be seen on every hand, and motor-lorries were being loaded alongside antiquated bullock-carts, the soldiers having whole gangs of Greeks, Jews, Armenians, and others working with them.

From the station they got a lift on a motor, and in the early afternoon reached the British camp. It was strongly entrenched, and work was going on at feverheat.

A staff-officer told them that General Mahon was up at the front, inspecting some new gun-emplacements, and there, presently, he was found. He keenly scrutinised the new-comers, took the letters handed to him, and placed them in his pocket.

After questioning the officers about affairs in France, the General led the way to his motor, and all returned to his quarters, where he read his despatches. Having done so, he said, 'You have brought me important news; but of a quite confidential nature. I am instructed that you have also despatches for Admiral Troubridge. I will supplement these with a letter, and then pass you on under escort to General Sarrail at Strumnitza. He has been able to push forward as far as Krivolak, and will be able to get you thus far safely on your journey. Between that and Veles will be your danger-zone; if you get past Veles you will reach Nish safely, though whether you will ever get back is another matter. The Bulgarians are straining every nerve to get astride the Vardar and gain possession of the Babuna pass. If they do that you will not be able to get back to me, and had best make for Monastir.'

The officers thanked General Mahon, and presently set out by motor for the French camp at Strumnitza, which they reached safely.

There was some difficulty and delay in gaining access to General Sarrail, who seemed an even busier man than General Mahon. When they did reach him they found him very affable, though curt and soldier-like in his manner. 'Under ordinary circumstances,' he said, 'I could not have done very much for you; but it happens that I have here two Serbian officers, Captain Stepanovitch and Lieutenant Vassilis, who have come in with information from General Jivkovitch. They are returning to-night, and, if they agree, you can go with them. I fear it would be useless to attempt the journey by yourselves.'

The British officers expressed themselves both obliged and delighted, on which the General asked them to dine with him that evening, when the two

Serbian officers would be present. They were found to be well-educated and highly intelligent officers, both of whom spoke French fluently. Captain Stepanovitch spoke English also, though somewhat

imperfectly.

'Serbia owes a great debt to Great Britain,' he said to Oliver. 'The Englishmen with the guns have fought magnificently. Perhaps it is not too much to say that after the fall of Belgrade they saved the Serbian army from capture. And of the doctors and the nurses who can say enough? Your soldiers are brave, that every one knows; but your ladies, who have fought the fever—ah, their work is beyond all praise!'

That night, in a semi-armoured motor-car, the British officers, with Rock and the two Serbians, set

off on their perilous ride.

Captain Stepanovitch drove, and beside him sat Vivian. The others were in the rear of the car. It was exceedingly cold, and all were well wrapped up, besides being armed to the teeth, for their path was

full of dangers.

It was a brilliantly moonlit night, and the ride was not without its enjoyment, for the scenery was magnificent. From the camp the road lay through Kavadar, the broad, swiftly-running Vardar River being on their right. At Kavadar they had to cross the unfordable river Tcherna by a long wooden bridge, that swayed in the wind and called forth a remark from Rock, as he looked down at the black swirling waters beneath, that he 'd 'rather be crossin' London Bridge on a motor-bus.'

They went for some distance along a rocky road, bounded by a rushing mountain torrent, and then

had to cross two more precarious wooden bridges before they emerged on the Veles-Monastir road.

Captain Stepanovitch stopped the car, and, pointing to some tiny specks that were visible among the mountains both to right and left, said, 'Gentlemen, these are camp-fires. We are now beyond the farthest French advanced post, and at any moment may run into parties of the enemy. These campfires may belong to scattered parties of Serbians, of Bulgarians, of brigands who prey on both nations, or even of German or Austrian cavalry. Have your pistols loaded, but leave me to do all the talking. Don't show yourselves more than cannot be helped, and be ready at a moment's notice to follow my lead should fighting become necessary.'

The British officers promised to obey, and Lieutenant Vassilis took the driver's seat, while Vivian went behind, the British being thus all together.

They proceeded for about two miles with great caution until right on the road in front of them a blazing fire was seen. In the light cast by the flames a number of rough-looking figures, clad in skin coats, some having hoods drawn over their heads, were seen standing or sitting about. A man with a long rifle in his hands stepped towards the car, which Captain Stepanovitch had stopped, and a conversation took place, of which naturally the British did not understand a word.

'A choice gang of ugly cut-throats,' said Rock.
'Puts me in mind of the bandits of the old Surrey Theatre dramas.'

'Hush!' whispered Oliver, and Lieutenant Vassilis looked round warningly, and whispered in French, 'Caution!'

Captain Stepanovitch had walked to the fire, and was seen to be talking with two of the men, to one of whom he presently offered his cigar-case, which he with the rifle—after taking a cigar which he lit with a piece of flaming wood from the fire—calmly put into his pocket.

Captain Stepanovitch and this man returned toward the car, the engine of which was still running free. The captain said something to Lieutenant Vassilis, who bent down and handed out a small handbag, which the man in the sheepskin coat at once opened. No sooner had he done so than Captain Stepanovitch whipped a revolver from his holster and fired straight in the man's face. At the same time he swung himself into the car, Lieutenant Vassilis threw in his gears, and the motor almost leapt forward. Captain Stepanovitch fired indiscriminately at the men round the fire, shouting out to Oliver and the others, 'Shoot any man you see!'

The British officers cracked away with their revolvers as the car, dashing into the fire, scattered it in all directions. Yells and shouts resounded; then a regular fusillade was opened on the travellers, bullets zipping by or striking the car frequently.

'Stand up,' cried Captain Stepanovitch, 'and fire at any one on the road before us.'

The British officers did so, and for a mile enjoyed a most exciting ride. The road was rough and stony, and the car jolted in a very alarming manner; but Lieutenant Vassilis steered it most skilfully. They were fired at from many a point, but no casualties were suffered, though every minute Oliver expected a tire to be punctured.

'Puts me in mind of the tales I used to read when



Cracked away with their revolvers as the car, dashing into the fire, scattered it in all directions.

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I was a boy,' said Dwyer, 'of the Santa Fé coach being attacked by Red Indians.'

'Only, I fancy the roads in those tales didn't contain boulders as big as a man's head,' said Vivian.

After a mile had been passed the excitement died down, and the pace became more steady.

'I think the most pressing danger is now over,' said Captain Stepanovitch. 'I would offer you a cigar, but that scoundrel Boyovitch pocketed my case, though I don't think he'll live long to use it.'

'Was that the amiable gentleman you shot?' asked Vivian.

'Yes, and as great a scoundrel as ever robbed in the Balkans, which is saying something. But I dare say you are curious to know what happened; and as it will wile away ten minutes I will tell you. The man you saw me talking to, and whom I shot, is a notorious brigand, half Serbian, half Albanian. He has fought in turn for Serbia, Albania, Greece, Bulgaria, and probably other nations. I have the advantage of knowing him, though he does not know me. When he stopped us I whispered to Vassilis who he was, and put him on his guard. Boyovitch would not tell me for whom he was in arms; but it was easy to guess from the position he has taken up that he is in the pay of Germany, and is fighting for Bulgaria, though I know he pretends to be in Serbian pay, in order to waylay small parties whom he robs and murders. I don't suppose it matters to him whether they are Serbs, Bulgars, or Germans. I pretended to be a Bulgarian officer, and said you were three Austrian officers, and that we were endeavouring to get into touch with the Austro-German army, for which we had important news. Keeping

my ears open while talking to him, I overheard a man just behind us say they were to make a sudden rush on the car, seize all that was in it, and cut all our throats. I told Boyovitch that we had a quantity of gold on the car, which he instantly demanded. Admitting to him that force was on his side and that we could do nothing, I came up to the car with him, and asked Vassilis for the bag you saw him give me, which as a matter of fact contained only a score or so packets of ammunition. While he was looking at the bag I saw our chance, and here we are.'

'An amiable sort of person, this Boyovitch!' said Vivian.

'Unfortunately there are many such,' said Captain Stepanovitch sadly. 'The war of 1912 thoroughly unsettled them, and they have never returned to work since. They took to the mountains, and have lived by robbery until the present war gave them another chance.'

By the time Captain Stepanovitch had finished all was quiet again, and they were speeding along at a good rate. Oliver and his friends presently dropped off to sleep, and when they awoke they found they were at a station from which the journey could be finished by rail.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

#### A TERRIBLE RETREAT.

DURING the day's travel increasing signs of the retreat of the Serbians were seen. Along the roads bullock-wagons, horsemen, and parties on foot were streaming, the foot-passengers often pushing trucks and even perambulators laden with bundles of household effects.

At Nish, which the Serbians still held, the rail was left, and by motor-car again, going by cross-country roads, the party went on to Kralievo, where the First Serbian Army then was.

Oliver and his companions were presented to General Mishitch, who informed them that the British, with the guns, were with the rear-guard, where they had done excellent service. The British officers decided to go out at once to Admiral Troubridge at Tchurtchick, as they did not know how important the despatches might be which they carried.

Captain Stepanovitch volunteered to act as guide, and they set out just before sunset. They found the Serbian troops busily throwing up earthworks, to resist as long as possible the Austro-German troops, which during the last two days had not pursued with much vigour, though after the fall of Belgrade there had been fierce and sanguinary fighting.

Admiral Troubridge, with his handful of gunners, was found erecting a battery, and when the gallant sailor saw the British officers he rubbed his

eyes. 'Where on earth did you spring from?' he asked.

'From Salonika last, Admiral,' answered Dwyer.

'And when were you there?'

'We arrived yesterday morning.'

'And got through here! Why, that's news! I heard the Bulgarians had cut off our communications with the south days ago.'

'Well, thanks to Captain Stepanovitch here, we

got through.'

'Are you just out from England?'

'No, from France; myself and Captains Hastings and Drummond,' indicating Oliver and Vivian, 'come from General Sir John French, and bear these letters, as well as one from General Mahon.'

'You surprise me. Anyway, I'm delighted to see fellow-countrymen. Now I'll just find out what the letters say.'

Captain Stepanovitch bidding them adieu, the others went to the house where the Admiral had taken up his quarters, and he read his letters. His face was very grave when he had finished, and, proceeding to the stove which burnt in the room, for the weather was cold, he pushed the letters in and watched them burn. Then he turned to the officers and said, 'The news you bring me is indeed grave. I am told that his Majesty's Government cannot send any more men to Serbia's assistance. I am not surprised, but it spells the doom of this poor nation. I am instructed to do what I can to cover the retreat, and to endeavour to join up with the French or British forces. But in view of the overwhelming forces of Austro-Germans pressing us from the north, and the Bulgarians from the south-east, I question

whether every man-jack of us won't be killed or captured. I've lost half my guns, smashed by shell-fire or through inability to move them, and one-third of my men. However, never say die; we'll do what we can.'

'And you can count upon us to help you, Admiral,' said Dwyer.

'Of that I am sure, and as an artillery officer you are more than welcome. Now tell me the news from the west, as that, after all, is where the decisive battle will have to be fought.'

They talked well on into the night, but next morning were astir by daybreak, and busy on their defences. The artillery had been well posted in the rear of the town, the Serbian troops holding Tchurtchick itself. While Dwyer went to the guns, Oliver and Vivian, with a pair of good field-glasses and a telescope, climbed a tall spire and looked round them. Their experienced eyes soon caught sight of small moving clumps, horsemen by their formation, and the occasional twinkle of scabbard or stirrupiron, which the trained eye easily distinguishes from the steadier flash of bayonets, strengthened the impression. These clumps were followed by guns, easily recognisable by the dust they made. Within an hour of these being seen, shells began to fall on the outskirts of the town.

'You know, Oliver,' said Vivian, 'this would be a splendid observation-post for our guns. If we could only get into touch with the Admiral we could give him the exact position of the enemy's artillery.'

'That's a clinking good idea, Vivian. You remain here on the spot while I go and find Dwyer. If these Serbs have got any telephone gear with them the job ought not to present any difficulties.'

With paper and pencil, Vivian made a rough plan of the country, and noted the position the batteries were taking up. While he was still busy Oliver and Dwyer returned, and the Major was delighted with Vivian's information.

'The Admiral has turned on a squad of men,' he said, 'and in an hour we shall have a telephone rigged up from here to our guns. It is most essential that we hold the place for three days, I am told, so as to allow the civil population to clear out, and we can only do so by smashing up their guns and so preventing them covering the advance of their infantry.'

In the time specified the telephone was finished, the Major had taken the range, and the British guns opened fire. The practice was splendid, and Oliver and Vivian were enabled to telephone the results as battery after battery of the enemy was silenced. At night strong parties of infantry were thrown into the suburbs to guard against a surprise attack, and next morning Oliver and Vivian were again at their post. The enemy guns had, however, been moved under cover of darkness, and were very difficult to locate. The Austro-German infantry having come up in large numbers, an attack in great force was made on the Nearer and nearer it got, the Serbians contesting fiercely but unavailingly against the overwhelming odds. Presently the enemy forced a way into the town, the Serbians retiring sullenly from street to street.

'If we don't want to fall into the hands of the Huns we'd better be getting,' said Oliver, and they descended from their perch. Joining in the crowd

below, they used their pistols freely on the enemy, but had to retire with the others, leaving the town in the hands of the enemy. The Serbians, however, were in no mind to allow the captors to remain in undisputed possession of it, and, being reinforced, prepared to recapture it.

Oliver and Vivian had one or two narrow escapes from being shot by Serbians, who mistook them for enemies, and so they made their way to the British battery, and there helped to work the guns, while the Serbians made a gallant assault on the town, which they retook, only to be again driven out. The carnage was terrible; and as night fell things quieted down by mutual consent, as though all were tired of killing.

The third day broke wet and cold, and it was evident that the enemy could not be long held in check. Word was received that the Bulgarians had taken Uskub, and spies brought in news that the enemy had been largely reinforced. Nevertheless, a stubborn fight was put up on the third day, and at night the word was given to retire.

The guns had to cover the retreat, and the confusion was terrible during the bitterly cold night. The enemy had been so severely handled that he did not pursue, and Krushevatz was reached. Here for a time the Serbians felt comparatively safe, as General Stepanovitch, Captain Stepanovitch's father, was holding Nish with the Second Serbian Army. The third army had, however, been defeated by the Bulgarians, who were then advancing on Nish from the south. This alarming news was received at Krushevatz the day after the arrival of the Serbian main army, and it caused great consternation.

Admiral Troubridge and the British officers discussed the situation.

'It's clear Nish can be no longer held,' said the Admiral, 'and the only chance of saving any of the Serbian army is instant retreat on Prishtina.'

'I don't know the country, and cannot give an

opinion,' said Dwyer.

'Well, we're caught between two superior forces, either of which could defeat us. If we could join up with General Stepanovitch we might do something;

but separately we can do nothing.'

The Admiral had a consultation with the Serbian commander, and it was arranged that the three British batteries should be sent to General Stepanovitch, who was weak in artillery. Under cover of the guns he was to try to retreat on Prishtina; if he could not succeed he was to die fighting. Lieutenant-Commander Kerr, R.N., was placed in command of the three British batteries, and with him went Oliver, Vivian, Dwyer, and Rock. It was a terrible journey, and before Nish was reached almost every one was dead-beat. General Stepanovitch at once prepared to retreat, and the guns took up position to defend the passage of the river.

Fortunately there was a good supply of ammunition, and the guns were worked incessantly while the Serbians were falling back across the Morava. The British batteries were bombarded by every gun the enemy could bring to bear upon them; but though gun after gun was smashed, and one by one the men of the gun teams were killed, the other guns stuck to their work, and held the enemy back while the Serbians retired.

At the end of the eighth day there were only six

guns left, and the gunners were worn almost to skeletons; but they had accomplished their work. That night word was given for the guns to follow the retreating army.

'Thank God!' said Dwyer; 'I do not think I could

have stuck another day of it.'

Oliver and Vivian were both too dead-beat to say anything; and had it not been for the untiring efforts of Rock in getting food for them they could hardly have stood the strain.

Commander Kerr had been the saviour of the whole party. Always vigilant, always calm, always hopeful, he had instilled them all with courage.

In getting away the guns two stuck in the mud, and despite all the efforts of the little band could not be moved.

'We shall have to strip and abandon 'em,' said Dwyer; 'but we'll render them useless to the Huns before we do;' and, this done, they retired with the four remaining guns.

The guns were always in the rear, and constantly engaged with the pursuing enemy. It seemed like some terrible nightmare; the weather was fearful, snow fell heavily, and the roads were choked with fugitives. Every mile or so the guns would halt and belch out at the foe, then on again. Being in the rear, Oliver and Vivian were always trying to prevent the fugitives from falling behind, for it was known that the enemy murdered without mercy great numbers of those who fell into his hands.

During that terrible retreat, Rock came out in a new character; he himself seemed made of iron, and trudged along, never complaining. Often Oliver saw him carrying a sturdy boy on his back, wheeling a barrow or a perambulator, holding an almost exhausted man or woman on a gun-carriage, or sharing his none too plentiful food with a starving peasant.

The pace was terrible, but the cry was always 'On! on!' for the Bulgarians, their relentless foes, were straining every nerve to cut them off from Prishtina. Faster they had to go, and in twenty-six hours covered forty-four miles; then, after a halt of three hours, they did eighteen miles more. The news, too, was always bad. The enemy had taken both Kralievo and Krushevatz, with sixty guns and enormous quantities of material.

At Prishtina a rest became imperative, and, food being obtainable, all halted. Part of the First Serbian Army was there, Admiral Troubridge with them. The British officers reported to him, and after a substantial meal they were comfortably housed, and enjoyed their first sound sleep for nearly three weeks.

Next morning a bath and a change of clothes were obtainable, and then the Admiral requested the presence of Commander Kerr, Dwyer, Oliver, and Vivian at breakfast.

# CHAPTER XXXIX.

#### ON A HOT SCENT.

HE situation,' explained the Admiral, 'has now become clear. The line of retreat of the Serbian Army has been settled by its defeat. It is now only possible to retire to Skutari, and that means a journey of one hundred miles over the most terrible mountains of Albania. How many will get across, or what their reception will be when they arrive, it is impossible to say. I shall accompany the King and the remains of his army; if we succeed in reaching the coast I shall be of use to these poor people; as will you, Kerr.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Now I am sending on a large number of British doctors, nurses, and so on, to Monastir, and I want to ensure their safety. You, Drummond, and you, Hastings, I want to go on in advance, taking certain letters for me to Monastir; thence you will go on to General Wilson with a confidential despatch, in which I can now give him the information he asked for in his letter to me.'

'We are under your orders, Admiral,' said the

young officers.

'And you, Major Dwyer, I leave to your own choice to go to Monastir, or to attempt to reach Skutari with us.'

'With your permission I will stick to the guns, Admiral.'

'And I shall be glad to have your co-operation.'

Later in the morning, Oliver and Vivian were shaking hands with Dwyer, the Admiral, and Commander Kerr, before stepping into a car, in which Rock was already seated with several warm rugs. Adieux being said, the chauffeur, a Serbian soldier, started his car, and away they went.

So tired were Oliver, Vivian, and Rock that they slept the best part of the day, nor had they afterwards any very clear idea of that journey to Monastir,

which they reached the same night.

There were some British there already, and Oliver and Vivian had but little difficulty in delivering the Admiral's letters to those to whom they were addressed. They got a lodging at a small café, and by dawn were off again on their long drive to Salonika, which they reached in the afternoon.

Directly they arrived they noticed a great difference on the place. The harbour had been greatly improved, new landing-places erected, sheds for the accommodation of stores built; while great numbers of both French and British soldiers were to be seen.

Oliver and Vivian found General Wilson, and were closeted with him for some time, giving him what particulars of the Serbian retreat they had seen.

Captain Strachan was still at Salonika, and expressed his pleasure at again meeting Oliver and Vivian. He obtained them quarters, where they were to remain for the present, as they were told their services might be required at any moment.

The following morning, Captain Strachan having duties to attend to, Oliver, Vivian, and Rock started out to have a look round Salonika. Walking along,

they met a very smartly dressed French officer, whom they were passing with a friendly salute when he stopped suddenly, took his cigarette from his mouth, and exclaimed in French, 'My young friends, the English prisoners!'

Oliver and Vivian looked in surprise for a moment; then the former said in the same language, 'Why, it's our old acquaintance the Major, who so coolly suggested shooting us after we had escaped from the

Germans!'

'Lieutenant-Colonel Le Mercier, at your service, gentlemen;' and the officer bowed most gallantly.

'Our apologies for the mistake, and congratulations

on your promotion.'

'Not another word!'

'And what are you doing here, Colonel?'

'Nothing much at present; but I hope soon to get busy. I've just come from the Dardanelles. business that! But tell me of yourselves.'

'With pleasure, and in return we must hear your adventures.'

'Let us converse by all means;' and, shaking hands all round, the Colonel continued, 'let us drop into that café I see, and be convivial for half-an-hour;' and soon they were all seated round a table enjoying coffee and cigarettes. They had much to tell one another, and an hour had passed when Oliver, looking out into the street, noticed a man who peeped in as he passed, and then went on along the street.

'Löffel!' he cried, and, jumping up, in a moment

he was in the street.

Vivian, hearing the name of the detested spy, explained in a few words to Colonel Le Mercier, and ran after Oliver.

The Colonel, a man of action, paid the score, and in a minute had joined his British friends.

'Don't call attention to us,' whispered Oliver. 'If he sees and recognises us he will be on his guard, and will slip through our fingers once more.'

'Which is he?' asked Le Mercier. 'The man in

the gray felt hat?'

'Yes.'

'Leave him to me. I will put a man on his track who will follow him anywhere. There is a fellow of my regiment coming who is a Paris gamin; he would track a sparrow across a desert.' He beckoned an alert little soldier, told him briefly what was required of him, and then said to the Englishmen, 'Leave the matter to Pierre; he will report to us at the café. Let us finish our smoke and our chat.'

Not feeling very confident about the result, Oliver assented, and soon they were back at the café, where Colonel Le Mercier asked all about the spy Löffel. Oliver told him briefly several of the man's attempts on their lives, and so on.

The Frenchman whistled. 'It is time that gentleman was laid by the heels,' he said.

'It is, Colonel. I think I'll see the General and get a warrant for his arrest.'

'Warrant! What for?'

'I think it would be necessary.'

'My dear Captain, leave it to me; I will manage this affair for you. In the French service we don't bother about warrants. I have authority to arrest any one on suspicion, and if you can prove he is the man you say he is—poof! bang! Voilà! there is no more spy, that's all.'

'Such a method has its advantages, Colonel,' said Vivian.

'Of course it has. We waste no time on spies.'

Presently a French soldier looked in at the café, saluted the Colonel, and said, 'Petit Pierre sent me, Colonel, to say he has found the house; and, if you approve, I am to take you to him.'

'Come!' said the Colonel to the English officers.

'Are you armed?'

'We have our pistols.'

'It is all we shall need.' And away they started with the French soldier. They went to the centre of the town, and there, in a small street, they found Petit Pierre.

'That is the house he entered, mon Colonel,' he said, pointing to a small house at the corner of a square.

'Follow me!' said Le Mercier, and, crossing the square, they at once knocked. The door was opened by a surly-looking Greek. The Colonel put out his foot to prevent the door being closed.—'You have your bayonet, Pierre,' he said; 'let no one pass without a permit from me.'

They all entered, and went from room to room, in which they found several natives, who looked angry at the intrusion.

At the top of the house were two men sitting at a table writing. They were made up in native fashion; but Vivian was too well acquainted with German characteristics to be deceived. 'You are Germans,' he said in that language. 'What are you doing here?'

One man turned in his chair, whipped a revolver from his pocket, and, pointing it at Vivian, said something in Greek. 'We don't speak the language,' said Oliver, who had been as quick as the man, who in turn found himself looking at the barrel of a pistol. 'You may just as well own up to your nationality at once.'

'We are Frenchmen,' said the other man in

French.

'Not with that accent,' replied Le Mercier coolly. 'Surrender yourselves prisoners.'

'Touch us at your peril,' said the first man, tearing

a paper which lay on the table.

Oliver seized his wrist in a firm grip, and Vivian picked up some papers, whereupon the man fired his revolver. But Rock had been watching him with lynx-like eyes, and his fingers had hardly closed on the trigger before the old soldier had dealt him a blow right between the eyes with his fist which laid him stunned on the ground. The second man attempted to struggle, but was overpowered and bound hand and foot.

The other occupants of the house came up the stairs, jabbering excitedly; but Colonel Le Mercier waved them gracefully aside. 'My good people,' he said, 'it's no use upsetting yourselves; there is something here that needs investigating, and investigated it will be.'

One man, who spoke French, threatened that King Constantine would exact all sorts of compensation for such an outrage.

'Possibly so, my dear sir,' said the Colonel, lighting a cigarette very deliberately; 'and if there is any ground for compensation you will get it. But we must first proceed with our little investigation; after that, if we find there is no ground for compensation, well then, I cannot say what you will get.'

Petit Pierre was sent for a file of soldiers, and the two supposed Germans, with the other inmates, were marched off prisoners to the French headquarters, while all the papers were seized.

The house was thoroughly searched, but no sign of Löffel could be found, which was a great disappointment. It was discovered, however, that the house had a back exit; and, as Petit Pierre was certain the spy had not left by the front, it was presumed he had gone by the back.

Colonel Le Mercier left two men behind in the house, with instructions to arrest any who entered, and bring them on to him. 'Now let's go along and examine the papers,' he said; and for the

next two hours they were busy.

Many of the papers were in code, and a good many were simply plans. But there were clever brains at the French headquarters, and it was soon clear that the two men they had arrested were German spies, and the documents proved they were in Salonika for some specific reason. One of the papers was very puzzling. It was in a German cipher which, decoded, ran, 'K. has certainly left London for the East. If he survives the journey he should not be allowed to return.'

'Now, who is K.?' asked Le Mercier.

'I know no more than you,' replied Oliver.

'Perhaps your General could help us; I dare say you would like to tell him what has occurred.'

'I think we had better report. I don't know what he 'll say about all this,' replied Vivian, not without some dread of the British estimate of the propriety of their actions.

The General listened very attentively to the tale o.H.

that was told him. 'We know the place is overrun with spies,' he said, 'but we are powerless against them.'

'Leave it to us, General,' said the French Colonel; 'perhaps we are not—er—so, shall we say, punctilious. But can you help us to establish the identity of this person who is called "K."?'

'I am afraid I cannot, Colonel; but I will wire London. Meanwhile, if this man Löffel could be caught it might be as well. I trust the Greek Government will not—er—resent your rather high-handed proceedings.'

'With our warships in the harbour, General, dominating the town, I don't think their resentment will trouble us very much.'

'Perhaps not—perhaps not;' and the British General smiled a little uneasily.—He turned to Oliver and Vivian. 'You gentlemen had better remain in your quarters,' he said. 'I may want you at a moment's notice.—And depend upon it, Colonel, I will communicate with you the minute I have any news.'

## CHAPTER XL

# LÖFFEL'S LAST SERVICE TO THE KAISER.

OLIVER and Vivian had been sitting silent for some time, each busy with his own thoughts. Presently Oliver spoke. 'It really is remarkable the way that fellow Löffel continually crosses our path.'

'And equally as annoying the way in which he

always manages to elude us.'

'True; I thought we had him this time.'

'We might have followed him up if the General hadn't required us to stay in our quarters. Somehow our people always seem so afraid of doing something that might offend somebody.'

'I must confess our French colonel's methods appeal more to me in this case; but, after all, the

British way has its advantages.'

Conversation again lagged, and it had grown dark when a spurred heel jingled, and Captain Strachan entered the room. 'Here you are,' he cried; 'that's good! Come at once with me to headquarters; you're wanted.'

'Hurrah! anything for a change,' said Oliver; 'I'm

tired already of doing nothing.'

They were soon at headquarters, and were at once admitted. The room was only dimly lit; and, sitting quite in the shadow, wearing a British 'warm' and a staff cap, was a tall man whose face could not be very clearly seen.

'Now just tell me again, so that I may have it com-

plete in detail, the particulars of the arrest of those two spies, and describe their appearance,' said General Wilson.

Vivian did so.

'Now tell me how the French managed to decode that message.'

Vivian explained, and then asked whether any information had been obtained as to who this mysterious 'K.' was.

The General gave a half-glance at the officer sitting in the shade, who rose to his feet and let the light

fall full upon his face.

'There's not much doubt that I am the unworthy cause of so much attention on the part of our Teutonic friends,' he said; 'and I must admire the excellent work their secret service does, though it's apt to get a bit embarrassing at times.'

Oliver and Vivian looked at the tall figure with the heavy drooping moustache, then sprang to their feet and saluted. Lord Kitchener stood before them! Though neither of them had ever seen the famous Field-Marshal before, they at once recognised him from his photographs.

'We've never met before, I think,' said Lord

Kitchener.

'No, my lord,' replied Oliver.

'Ah, my tell-tale face! it's just that that played into the hands of the Germans. However, we shall outwit them. Neither of the men you describe is the one who has been dogging me from—no matter where. It's a fellow with green eyes and a light felt hat that's giving my staff a lot of trouble.'

'That's Löffel, I should say,' said Vivian.

'Describe him, and tell me what you know of him.'

Vivian did so.

'That's the man,' said Lord Kitchener. 'Now General Wilson will give you authority to hunt round at Salonika and find this fellow. Arrest him wherever and whenever you see him. I observe you carry pistols. If he resists, don't give him any chance of getting away.'

'Very good, my lord.'

'I'm staying here. Report what happens.'

'Well, of all the wonders,' said Oliver when they were in the street; 'who'd have thought of'-

'Hush! no names, Noll.'

"K," we'll say, being here; and what is he here for?'

'I shouldn't like to ask him, and I sha'n't care about facing him if we don't get hold of Mr Löffel.'

'We'll do what we can. Shall we get the assistance of Le Mercier?'

'No, I prefer to attempt the job off my own bat. We'll take Rock; he's a wily old snake, and a reliable man in a tight corner.'

Rock had been asleep when Oliver and Vivian had gone out; but the old man was very wide-awake when they returned, and cross at having been left.

'You ain't fit to be trusted out in this 'ere place after dark by yourselves,' he said; 'an' if you gets lost, 'ere 'ave I got to find you, and the only lingo I can speak to the natives in is the old John Company language.'

'What was that, Rock?'

'The boot!'

'Well, pull yourself together, and come with us. We've got a bit of business on.'

'Pull myself together! H'm! I like that!' snorted

Rock; 'since we're captains, the airs of some people! Lord'- and he contemptuously flicked an imaginary fly from his right knee.

The three set out, and first went straight to the house from which the two suspected spies had been arrested. Petit Pierre had made himself quite at home, and was taking his ease. No one had entered the house since he had been in charge.

'A blank there!' said Vivian. 'Let's have a hunt

round; we may find something out.'

Two hours had been spent thus when old Rock said, 'Might I ask what we're a-lookin' for, or are we a patrollin' picket?'

'Pon my word, Rock, I think your question well timed,' said Oliver .- 'Vivian, I vote we seek Colonel

Le Mercier.'

'Just what I was about to propose;' and they turned their steps in the direction of the colonel's quarters.

The searchlights were busy scanning the sky for aeroplanes, a number of which had flown across, dropping bombs and doing a considerable amount of

damage.

Colonel Le Mercier was not in his quarters, but an orderly informed Oliver and Vivian that he was at the principal searchlight station, and kindly conducted them there. They found the Colonel full of enthusiasm, and very busy.

'We have received a hint that there is a Zeppelin about, and we have a new anti-aircraft .75 that we

are anxious to try on it,' he explained.

Oliver and Vivian were very much interested in the working of the searchlight, and followed its dazzling beam with curiosity. The night was a still

and dark one, just suitable for a raid. There were several searchlights at work, and when their beams crossed the result was a most brilliantly lit-up patch. A smaller light occasionally flashed out and threw its beam upwards; but whenever the Colonel tried to cross its rays it disappeared.

This occurred several times, until at last the Colonel grew angry. 'Whoever is working that light is either purposely disobeying his instructions or is a fool!' he exclaimed. 'In either case he ought to be punished.'

'The light seems of a different intensity too,' said Vivian.

'Decidedly it is, my friend.'

Presently a deep whirring, buzzing sound was distinctly heard, on which the mysterious light appeared at more frequent intervals, but none the less obstinately avoided crossing the other beams of light.

'If that noise isn't made by the engines of a Zeppelin I'm very much mistaken,' said Oliver. 'It's a long time since I heard one before, but I distinctly remember the sound.'

'I wonder if you're right,' cried Le Mercier excitedly.

The noise grew more insistent and apparently circled round them. It was clearly above. The searchlights flashed to and fro, but were unable to discover the monster of the air.

'Colonel,' said Vivian, 'it's a Zeppelin right enough, and I have a suspicion that those mysterious lights are made by some traitor flashing signals to it. I'm off to investigate.'

'Ma foi! I believe you're right, and I'm coming

with you.—Captain Bouchet, take over the search-light.'

In another minute the three officers, with Rock, were hurrying through the streets in the direction from which came the mysterious light. All the while overhead the deep, ominous buzz of the motors could be heard getting clearer when the small light showed for any length of time, while the bigger searchlights failed to find the airship. Meanwhile the officers got nearer and nearer to General Wilson's quarters.

Suddenly, Oliver almost shouted, 'By George! I've got it.'

'Where, where,' asked Vivian, thinking he had located the light.

'I mean the idea,' said Oliver. 'Haven't you noticed that the sounds seem to get nearer to the light we are following?'

'Yes.'

'The Zeppelin is obviously being guided, and is nearing General Wilson's quarters. We know who's there. Remember the message we found about "K." A dozen bombs from the Zeppelin, and one is sure to find its mark.'

'Good Lord! of course. What shall we do?'

'Find the man who's guiding the Zepp, and shoot him.'

Le Mercier was told what Oliver and Vivian suspected, and he was quite of their opinion.

The streets were crowded with curious soldiers or terrified natives. Oliver and Le Mercier ordered all the soldiers, British or French, to try to discover from which house the mysterious light was being flashed, and to let them know.

In five minutes a hundred men were searching, and

presently a loud cry was heard, and Rock came running up to Oliver. 'It's spotted,' he said; 'I saw it too.'

They ran down a narrow street, at the end of which was a high factory building. From the roof of this a bright light was shining almost vertically. A brief look at the place showed that there was a wall round it, the entrance being through double gates.

'Put a guard round the place, Rock,' said Oliver, 'and stop any one who tries to pass. If resistance is offered, use force; but let no one pass from any exit.'

'Go ahead, captain; no one will pass me,' said Rock cheerily. 'If any Boche attempts the trick I'll make long pig of 'im before 'e can shut an eyelid.'

Oliver, with Colonel Le Mercier and Vivian, entered the factory, and in a minute had found the stairs, up which they went. While they were ascending, three terrific explosions were heard, followed by the sound of falling glass and the screams of injured people.

'The Zeppelin is dropping bombs!' cried Vivian. 'Hurry, Noll!'

They raced up the stairs till they reached a large loft. Across this they had to grope their way to an open trap-door, through which the faint light above was seen. A ladder led up to the trap-door, and they were just going to mount it when a man sprang from the shade; and, standing at the bottom of the ladder, flashed a light from an electric pocket-lamp full upon them. Seeing the uniforms, he drew a pistol and fired two shots. The first missed, but at the second report Vivian fell to the ground. At the same moment Oliver, who had his pistol in his hand, fired full in

the man's face, and he dropped without a groan. Oliver sprang up the ladder, Le Mercier close behind him. They found they were on a flat roof, from the side of which a powerful light was being flashed. A man had been working this light; but, hearing the sound of shots, he turned round, and, seeing two figures rushing toward him, drew a pistol, and cried out in French, 'Who are you, and what do you want? I am a French engineer officer.'

'Liar!' replied Oliver in German, recognising the voice. 'You are Otto Löffel, spy and murderer, and your doom is sealed!'

A flash from the spy's pistol, and a bullet hummed by! Next moment Oliver fired, and the man gave a

cry, dropping his pistol.

Oliver threw himself upon him, and, seizing him by the throat, bore him down on to the roof. Several soldiers, both French and English, had followed the officers up to the roof, and they now ran to their assistance.

Oliver heard a well-known voice at his elbow, 'Got'im this time, 'ave you, sir?'

'Is that you, Rock? Yes, I've got him. Here, take him and truss him up with your belt. Shoot him if he tries to escape.'

'Right-o, sir!'

'Captain Drummond is hurt, and I must go to him.'

'If this blighter's 'urt Mr Drummond I'll wring his blinkin' neck.'

Another tremendous report sounded, which shook the factory, and, looking round, Oliver saw the light still shining from the roof, its rays falling directly on a cupola-shaped roof, near which the bombs were falling. He at once recognised the building. It was General Wilson's headquarters, and Lord Kitchener was there! The meaning of the mysterious message was now clear.

'Switch off the light, Colonel!' he cried; and Le Mercier, who had been busy examining it, unable to switch it off, turned it right over, so that its rays went entirely in the opposite direction. For an instant the roof was illuminated, and Oliver saw that his prisoner was indeed Löffel.

No sooner was the light turned off than the throbbing of engines was heard, and, looking up, Oliver saw the dim outline of an enormous Zeppelin caught in the rays of the French and British searchlights.

The moving of the light on the roof had caused the Zeppelin, which had apparently been stationary, to move in the direction in which the rays pointed. The monster airship was crossing the town, and moving toward the harbour. It had ceased to drop bombs, but had turned on a searchlight, and seemed to be making signals.

When the searchlights of the Allies had picked up the Zeppelin the guns opened on it, and the bursting shrapnel looked like a display of fireworks.

'Hark! I hear the bark of the '75,' said Le Mercier delightedly. 'We shall hit it, though I am afraid if it falls in the town it will do much damage.'

Oliver had been looking at the Zeppelin, and noticed that it had turned off its own light, and was making in the direction in which Le Mercier had again turned the light which Löffel had been using. In an instant an idea seized him. 'The Zeppelin is certainly guided by the direction of the light here,' he said. 'If we

could entice it out over the harbour the naval guns would take up the bombardment, and if they brought it down in the sea it would do no harm.'

'Splendid!' cried Le Mercier, 'leave it to me;'

and he began manipulating the searchlight.

Leaving him to his task, Oliver found that Löffel was unable to walk, and instructed some French soldiers to get a stretcher, and take him, closely guarded, to the French headquarters. Rock went with them. He next found that Vivian had had a narrow escape, the spy's bullet having grazed his head and stunned him. He had, however, recovered consciousness, and when he heard that Löffel was captured he expressed his satisfaction with a faint cheer. He was able to accompany Vivian to General Wilson's headquarters, where they found things perfectly quiet.

Lord Kitchener, though the bombs had exploded quite close to his quarters, was perfectly calm. He expressed his satisfaction at the arrest of Löffel, and complimented the young officers on their success, and insisted on Vivian being attended to by the General's doctor. 'It was a smart idea of yours to entice the Zeppelin across the harbour, Captain Hastings,' he said. 'I am sure the navy will give it a warm reception. I can distinguish the heavy boom of their guns, so let us go out and see what is happening.'

In spite of the danger, half Salonika seemed to be at the harbour looking out over the sea. In the air the Zeppelin could still be seen, turning this way and that, trying to evade the searchlights, while the firing grew heavier and heavier. It seemed to have been 'winged,' for it manœuvred rather clumsily, and presently, after a shell burst just under it, its

nose dropped, and it came down a considerable distance, evidently badly damaged. It managed to turn its head landwards, and set off at full speed, the crowd below, of all nationalities, yelling and cheering wildly. French and British motors and cavalrymen went dashing off in the direction taken by the Zeppelin, determined that if it came down the crew should find some one to welcome them.

'And now I think we had better return,' said Lord Kitchener.—'Captain Hastings, consider yourself on my staff, and Captain Drummond also, when he is well enough. See that affair of the spy through, and report to me the result.'

## CHAPTER XLI.

#### THE NAVY WAY.

OLIVER'S first thought was for Vivian, who said a good night's sleep would put him all right. They went to their quarters, whither Rock had already returned.

''Ang these people's lingo,' said Rock; 'why can't

they speak English? 'Ere's a letter for you, sir.'

Oliver found it was a request for Vivian and himself to attend on the following morning a courtmartial on Löffel and the other spies.

Vivian had a good night, and in the morning felt

much better.

Le Mercier was an early visitor. 'My dear young friends, I have good news for you,' he said. 'The Zeppelin was badly damaged, and came down on some marshy ground. Some of our cavalry found it this morning.'

'And the crew?'

'Bah, the crew! Dropped into the sea, blown up by a bomb, suffocated in the marsh; anything—who knows?' and the Colonel shrugged his shoulders.

The inquiry into the guilt of Löffel and his accomplices did not last long. Colonel Le Mercier's testimony alone would have convicted them; but Oliver and Vivian had an overwhelming mass of evidence, and the tribunal did not rise from their seats to consider their verdict. 'Guilty,' they declared at once, and passed the sentence 'to be shot at noon.'

Löffel, evidently in pain from his wound, was sullenly silent during the evidence; but, when he heard his doom, he at first threatened that Germany would make reprisals if he were hurt; then offered to betray important secrets as the price of his life; and finally, turning to Vivian, burst into tears, and threw himself upon his mercy. 'I served you faithfully and well,' he said. 'I could have got you imprisoned many times in Berlin before the war, and it was I who effected your liberty after you were condemned to death. Use your influence with Lord Kitchener to save me.'

'So you know Lord Kitchener is here?'

'Yes.'

'Well, I have no influence with him, and if I had I would not raise a finger to save you. You speak falsely when you say you saved Captain Hastings and me from death; it was just a freak of your mad Kaiser. Since then you have deliberately tried to hurl to a horrible death a whole train-load of soldiers who hadn't fired a shot, you have tried to poison me and my friends, you have attempted to shoot Captain Hastings, and last night you would have murdered a hundred women and children quite calmly in order to effect your end. You are a choice example of your boasted German Kultur; you are a liar, a thief, and a murderer, and richly deserve your doom. Shooting is too good for you, and the only recommendation I make on your behalf is that hanging be substituted for shooting.' With these scathing words, Vivian turned his back upon the wretched man, who, cursing both him and Oliver vehemently, was led away.

They were leaving the barracks when Rock asked, 'Where are you goin' now, gentlemen?'

'To our quarters.'

'Well, excuse me, I'll just stop an' see the last o' this 'ere Mr Löffel. I thought in my own mind 'e was done in when 'e 'opped off the train, an' I don't much like 'is turnin' up 'ere agen. I mean to see that these 'ere Frenchies make a good job of it this time, an' if they don't, well, I fancy I can 'andle a rifle.'

When Oliver and Vivian reached their quarters they found a letter awaiting them, bidding them report at once at General Wilson's quarters. Arrived there, they were informed that Lord Kitchener was leaving Salonika that night, and that they were to accompany him. They returned to their own quarters, and were busy packing when old Rock returned.

'That's a good job done,' he said.

'Is Löffel shot?' asked both officers at once.

'Dead as a door-nail. Them Frenchies don't mess about on a job like this. They trotted the men out, an' didn't waste no time sortin' an' shufflin' rifles same as we do. Each man loaded, an' when the Boches were stuck up agin' a wall they just let rip an' riddled 'em. I made quite sure as Löffel was dead this time, as we don't want 'im turnin' up any more.'

'Did he die game, Rock?'

'Oh, middlin'. 'E looked pretty pasty-faced, an' died like the sullen dog 'e was, as likewise did the others.'

'Well, it's so many Boches less, and dangerous ones at that,' said Vivian, and the matter dropped.

According to their instructions, they reported at General Wilson's quarters that night, with their luggage. An hour later, in a closed carriage, they went down to the harbour, and in half-an-hour were on board a small cruiser. They at once put out to sea for a destination unknown to them. Amongst Lord Kitchener's personal staff were some very nice people, and Oliver and Vivian were soon quite at home. The weather was rather rough, but still the voyage was enjoyable.

Next morning, while some of the military officers were on deck, chatting with the naval officers, a warning cry came from the lookout man, 'Periscope on the port bow, sir!' A whistle rang out, and with a celerity which drew forth the admiration of the military officers, the tars raced to their quarters, the loaded guns being ready to be fired in an instant.

"Ware torpedo!" shouted the lookout man, and instantly the course of the cruiser was altered. Oliver and Vivian, fascinated spectators of the scene, saw the circular white splash on the water made by the torpedo as it left the tube of the submarine, and the foamy ribbon that denoted its track; something passed close by their bows, missing them quite narrowly, and that only because the vessel's course had been altered.

'Hard a starboard! Ram her!' came the curt command; and Lord Kitchener, who had come on deck smoking a cigarette, calmly walked towards the bow of the vessel. The cruiser swung round and went towards the periscope at full speed. At the same moment a double report, which shook the cruiser, rang out, and two shells, beautifully placed, fell close to the periscope, throwing up two huge columns of water as they burst.

"Ware torpedo!" again came the warning, and the water was marked by a second ripple. Again the

cruiser's course was altered; then bang! bang! went her guns. She raced forward at top speed, there was a bumping, jarring grind, a muffled sound was heard from under the water, and the periscope disappeared.

'Hooray!' shouted a young midshipman; 'that's another that will never see the old Kiel Canal

again.'

The cruiser stopped her engines, and made a circle round the spot where the periscope had been seen. Bubbles of froth and a quantity of black oil appeared on the surface.

'Sure sign!' said a naval lieutenant, 'Davy Jones's locker this time!'

'It was an enemy submarine, I suppose,' ventured Oliver.

'Bet your life, my boy; a Deutscher. We've known there were several about, and our fellows have bagged one already. This is No. 2. Seeing whom we've got on board, we expected to run against something, and had both eyes open,' and he winked expressively in the direction of Lord Kitchener.

'It was a near thing, though, wasn't it?'

'Oh, a miss is as good as twenty miles at this game,' and the lieutenant strolled carelessly away.

'An' what are we messin' about for now,' asked Private Rock, who had also been a witness of the scene.

'To pick up any survivors, I suppose,' replied Oliver.

'Bah! what putrid rot; let 'em drown, I says, same as they did the women and kids in the Lusitania. Why should we trouble about savin' the blighters?'

'It's a way they 've got in the navy, Rock,' replied Vivian.

'And a jolly silly way too; what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. If we wasn't so blamed well fond of our enemies they wouldn't take so many liberties with us,' and Rock spat savagely into the sea.

There did not happen to be any survivors to rescue, and the cruiser went on her way. Presently a British Dreadnought joined them, and together they made Mudros, where anchor was dropped. There Lord Kitchener, with some of his personal staff, landed, and was met by a small crowd of officers in high command. Oliver and Vivian were left behind; and, looking over the vessel's side at the beach where the party landed, made many conjectures as to what had brought Lord Kitchener out from England.

'It's pretty clear to me,' said Oliver, 'that the business is connected with the Balkan and Gallipoli affairs, and that it is of the highest importance is clear from the fact that Germany is very keen on preventing him from carrying out his mission.'

'It's marvellous the way the Huns get to know everything that is going on; it shows that we are far too lenient at home in allowing Germans still to be at large, or else there are traitors amongst our

own people!'

'A little of each perhaps,' said Oliver. 'Anyway, this trip of K. of K. gives us a pleasant change, and I shouldn't be surprised if we went on to Gallipoli. I hope we do, for I should much like to see a place we've all heard so much about.'

Oliver's wish was fated to be gratified, for later

in the afternoon Lord Kitchener and a crowd of Generals came aboard again, and at full speed they set out for the Gallipoli Peninsula.

It was a bright moonlit night when they dropped anchor in Anzac Cove and landed on the beach. sands shone white in the moonlight, and the scrubcovered heights towered up in the background, looking so steep that Oliver and Vivian marvelled how the gallant Australians and New Zealanders ever 'made good' in face of the furious fire that met them on their landing. The foreshore was crowded with stores of all descriptions, and men temporarily relieved from the trenches crowded into extemporised huts and dugouts under the cliff. The roar of great guns and the rattle of musketry was incessant, and occasionally the scream of a shell overhead proved how close the Turks still were. The night was passed in shelter under the cliff, and with the first dawn of day the tour of inspection was begun.

There was a group of famous men with Lord Kitchener: General Sir Charles Monro, the hero of many an Indian Frontier fight, General Sir William Birdwood, a dashing cavalry officer, who had carried a wound for weeks, and never said a word about it, and many another of lesser rank whose name will go down to posterity as a hero of the Dardanelles campaign. They visited the scene of the Krithia battle, where the New Zealanders had covered themselves with glory, the Lone Pine trenches, and Quinn's Post, named after the gallant Major Quinn of the 15th Australian Infantry, where the fire-trenches, mere ledges on the edge of a precipice, were only twenty yards from the enemy. They went to Dead

Man's Ridge, where the Australian Light Horse charged the Turkish trenches, and not a solitary man returned; Gabu Tepe, the hill which the New Zealanders and Australians carried at such a deadly cost, and afterwards held so heroically—just a semicircular position at the top of the cliff, where often over one thousand shells fell in an hour; and, lastly, Suvla Bay, where the British so narrowly missed a crowning victory, the place where Briton and Australian had penetrated so far that they could see across the Dardanelles, and then had to retire because again, as at Balaclava, some one in high command had blundered!

They saw Beach B, where Yorkshires and Manchesters had made their gallant landing; they saw the almost perpendicular rocks which these heroes had scaled; they saw the place where Northumberland and Lancashire Fusiliers had raced to be first at the foe; Beach C, where through the mistake of a general officer, the Irish Brigade—Munster, Irish, and Dublin Fusiliers—had been compelled to march four miles under a heavy fire before they got into action; Chocolate Hill, in the capture of which Lincolns and Borderers did such magnificent service, and Chunuk Bair, splendidly carried by the men of Wales and Gloucestershire.

Nothing escaped Lord Kitchener's scrutiny, and it was seen that he closely questioned the Generals with him.

By night-time the whole of the British front had been visited, and a council of war was held far into the night.

In the early morning Lord Kitchener took his departure. He bade farewell to Oliver and Vivian.

'You will for the present remain with Sir William Birdwood,' he said. 'I shall not forget the service you have rendered me; be equally useful to General Birdwood, and you will not find me ungrateful.'

## CHAPTER XLII.

#### THE END OF A GREAT ADVENTURE.

OLIVER and Vivian were soon at home in their new surroundings. Used to the discomforts of France, they easily settled down in the peninsula. The fact that one was practically always under fire was somewhat uncomfortable, but even that they got used to. The feeling of being hemmed in was rather trying—it was just a narrow strip of land which the British occupied, all advance barred by the enemy, all retreat stopped by the sea.

Soon after they arrived, the Turkish artillery fire increased very materially, while the quality much improved, this being due to the opening by Germany of the railway route through Serbia, along

which they poured munitions.

Still, as Rock observed, the food was good and plentiful; the duties, at least so far as they were concerned, light; and the weather warm. What more could a soldier want?

This last advantage was very shortly lost, for a terrible gale of rain and snow broke with great violence over the peninsula. For twelve hours it simply poured, and every one was soaked to the skin. Vivian had been sent to Mudros the day before, but Oliver was in the trenches when the storm commenced. The rain flooded the trenches and dugouts, the former becoming simply rushing torrents which the men were obliged to evacuate. The Turks had

to leave their trenches too, and for a time a hot fire upon each other was maintained. But presently the weather conditions were such that all parties had to think rather of preserving their own lives than of taking anybody else's. Dead Turks were swirled down the gullies into the British lines, and for a time the British deserted their trenches. The rain was followed by a piercing north wind and a biting frost which froze the water round the men's feet as they stood in the trenches.

Oliver and Rock worked like slaves all night, conveying rum and warm soup to the men thus situated, and saved many lives. As it was, one corps in two nights lost over two hundred men from frost and exposure. Thousands of men fell sick; and, on returning from Mudros, Vivian—with Oliver and Rock—was attached to the medical department, and worked day and night in assisting to get away from the trenches and on board the transports the thousands of incapacitated men.

On the fourth day the sun shone and the weather grew mild and genial again; but the mischief had already been done, and the last straw in the sufferings of the army of Gallipoli had been borne.

It was on the first fine day after the storm that General Birdwood, to whom the young officers had grown quite attached, sent for them and addressed them confidentially. 'Before Lord Kitchener left he recommended you both to me, and my personal observation convinces me that I can trust you implicitly. When Lord Kitchener was here he discussed the position and the possibilities; and all who were present with him agreed with his views of the matter. These views have been placed before his Majesty's Govern-

ment, and after consideration have been accepted and confirmed to me by telegraph. In short, it has been decided to evacuate the peninsula.'

Oliver and Vivian looked the surprise they could not express, and Sir William Birdwood continued: 'The whole campaign, as carried out, has been a great mistake. There were possibilities, and we have held up a large force of Turks who could have done an enormous amount of damage in other spheres; but now there are circumstances, which I cannot tell you, that render immediate evacuation imperative. It will be one of the greatest and most difficult undertakings of the war. If we succeed it will be a triumph of military organisation; if we fail it may easily turn out to be the crowning calamity of the war. Needless to say, the greatest secrecy will have to be observed. Not a regimental officer or a man will know what is going to happen until he is actually on the beach to embark. Did the enemy suspect our intention, probably not a quarter of our force would leave the peninsula alive. It is in this work of secret organisation for departure that I want your services. Lord Kitchener has spoken in high terms of your tact and discretion, and you will give me your word of honour that you will not breathe to a living soul what I have told you.'

Oliver and Vivian at once did so, and then details of the great undertaking were entered into, and the work commenced. Without any ostentation, and without any of the subordinates employed knowing what the reason was, all acting under the direction of a few staff officers in the confidence of the high command, the winter stores and miscellaneous articles were concentrated on the shore and embarked under

cover of darkness. Next the bulk of the ammunition and food was shipped, and then drafts of men were marched down from the trenches during three nights, and quietly transferred to the transports, while not a whisper of what was going on escaped to the enemy. Eighty thousand Turks were entrenched before the British lines, and the whole army was drawn off under their very noses, and they never suspected what was going on.

As the vast task neared its completion, the excitement of those engaged in it grew; it was a gigantic game of bluff, in which the stake was men's lives. Did the enemy guess how few were the men left, a determined attack with the overwhelming odds they could throw into the scale would result in the death or capture of every man and the loss of every gun. So that, when on the last night but one they began to move the heavy guns and to withdraw all but the men holding the trenches, excitement ran very high. Still, fortune, which had so often been against them, stood the British in good stead, and the work went on without a hitch.

Then came the last day. In order to divert the enemy's attention, a vigorous attack was opened at Krithia, and, with the help of fire from the warships, trenches were taken and held that night against counter-attack. Then at about half-past three a huge mine was exploded near Russell's Top; and while the Turks momentarily expected an attack, the last troops were embarking, while the enemy was blazing furiously at the empty trenches.

The evacuation was a triumph of organisation; and as Oliver and Vivian, with the last of the soldiers, left the trenches, they could not resist laughing at the way the Turk had been fooled. Bonfires were burning in the trenches, a gramophone was playing 'The Turkish Patrol,' and the enemy was blazing away at—nothing.

The few officers who were left behind were going to Krithia. It was not without a feeling of regret that they saw the last boatloads of men and guns leave the shore, that strand which they had won with such determined gallantry, which they had held at the price of thousands of lives, and which they gave up, regretfully and sullenly, because of the blunders of high officials and under direct orders from home.

Next day, when the Turk found out how he had been fooled, he was exceedingly angry, and showed his resentment by a furious attack on Krithia, which it was publicly given out by the British would be held at any cost. The attack was beaten off, as were several others. Then followed a day or two of comparative peace, and Christmas Day passed with many a festivity. The Turks being again lulled, French and British prepared to evacuate Krithia. The same steps were taken as at Suvla, and all went well, except that the Turks suspected the move.

One afternoon Oliver had been sent up to the advanced trenches with a message to the officer in command there regarding the evacuation. There was a very heavy bombardment going on, and the officer said he was afraid they would have great difficulty in getting away. Even while they were talking the bombardment ceased, and the Turks sprang from their trenches to attack. The men belonging to the Staffords jumped on to the fire-step, and rifles and machine-guns got to work. For an hour a fierce fight was waged, the Turks attacking with much fury; but

at last they were driven off, though the attack cost the British one hundred casualties.

Two nights later a little group of officers and men were standing in pitch darkness by a huge mountainlike heap of stores and ammunition, amongst which were seventeen worn-out guns.

'Is all ready?' whispered Oliver, one of the group.

'All ready,' replied an Engineer officer.

'Then wait for the signal from the beach.'

Presently a red light was flashed to and fro three times.

'Come!' said Oliver, and the party moved toward the beach, where a very high sea was running.

It was almost daylight, for the rough sea had greatly impeded the embarkation. At last the little party reached the beach, where a launch, in which were several military and naval officers of high rank, was anchored. Oliver reported 'all ready.'

'Fire the fuse, then,' said a calm voice.

This was done, and the party of officers embarked, the launch at once putting out to sea.

Before they reached the transport destined to take them, a tremendous explosion of ten tons of explosive material seemed to shake the very earth, and caused a great wave to roll out from the beach.

'That sounds the knell of the many wild ambitions in the Dardanelles,' said Oliver sadly.

'And is a salute over the graves of the thousands of gallant fellows whose bones lie in that accursed peninsula,' and Vivian reverently raised his cap.

# CHAPTER XLIII.

#### AN AFFAIR OF CAVALRY.

THE evacuation of the Dardanelles was already a matter of history. Many weeks had elapsed, during which time Oliver, Vivian, and Rock had been at Salonika. Work there had been easy, and all were in the pink of condition. The news from home had been good. Colonel Hastings had been moved to England, and after a very narrow escape from death was well on the way to recovery. From the regiment came cheery news. Major Lloyd was now Lieutenant-Colonel, and was still in command; Harris, quite recovered, and a captain, had returned to duty; and Skinner, also a captain, was coming out with the next draft. The regiment was still in 'rest' billets; and, having been made up to full strength, was anxious to get at the Boche again. Lord Rossville had rejoined as a private, and, despite having been recommended for a commission, remained a private, but in possession of The Russians had given the Turks some very hard knocks, and had captured Erzeroum; but the Turks in turn had bottled up a British force in Mesopotamia, and, as Rock put it, 'honours were easy.'

The Allies had greatly strengthened themselves at Salonika; and, though they had been obliged to retire from their advanced positions at Strumnitza and Lake Doiran, held a strongly fortified line from the mouth of the Vardar to the Gulf of Orfano.

Serbia no longer existed as a nation; the remnants

of the army had reached Durazzo, whence they had been transferred to Corfu, and were being nursed back to health and fighting strength. Admiral Troubridge had got safely through, as also had Major Dwyer and Commander Kerr. The British guns had covered the retreat of the army from Prishtina. On the very first day, two became hopelessly embedded in the mud, and, in spite of the efforts of two hundred and fifty men and all the available oxen, had to be left behind. Next, one of the two remaining guns fell through a bridge into the river and was lost, and at the end of the retreat the last nine members of the gun crew found themselves alone and unable to move the only gun left. They stripped and buried it; then, after sixty-seven days' incessant fighting, followed the retreating Serbians, nine men only out of the one hundred and three who had composed the crews at the beginning of the action at Belgrade.

'And some day,' said Major Dwyer, as he related his adventures to Oliver and Vivian, 'if I'm here when we advance again, I mean to dig that gun up and serve out medicine with it to the Huns and those scoundrels of Bulgars.'

One of the little excitements of Salonika was to go out with patrols in the hope of meeting a similar patrol of Germans, and having a brush with them. The British sought these encounters from a mere love of sport; and the Germans, when found, would, if in numbers of four or five to one, sometimes show fight; more often, though, they galloped off, their idea of 'sport' being of a vastly different nature from that of the British.

There was a post out south of Lake Doiran where Oliver and Vivian sometimes went in order to enjoy a gallop and the excitement of a hunt for enemy patrols. Rock had employed his spare time at Salonika in learning how to drive a motor-car, and used to drive his masters about.

One Sunday Rock drove Oliver and Vivian out; and, after a good breakfast with the officer in command of the outlying picket, the two friends borrowed a couple of mounts, and set off with a troop of cavalry.

'By Jove, young Noll, it's delightful to feel horseflesh between one's knees, and to hear the jingle of a bit and the clink of a stirrup-iron again.'

'I believe you're a cavalry man at heart, Vivian!' said Oliver. 'You'll have to transfer.'

'No, I like the infantry service best; but I love a good horse for all that.'

'So does old Rock,' laughed Oliver.

'By the way, you never told me that yarn of Rock's about his riding.'

'Didn't I? No, I remember you came in just as he was finishing.' And Oliver told the story.

Vivian laughed heartily, and they settled down to enjoy the ride. They went along a valley that gradually broadened as it stretched towards the Gulf of Orfano. To the left, between two open and beautiful low-lying tracts, rose a number of irregular green hills, and it was in this country that the Germans were generally met with. Here the patrol was split up, the 'point' making good each hilltop and exploring each gully as they advanced. It was exciting and interesting work, and Oliver and Vivian thoroughly enjoyed it. Presently one of the advance guard held up his arm warningly for the rest to halt; then lowered his open palm several times towards the

ground. This was the signal to dismount, and the troop was out of the saddle in a minute. The advance guard came back and reported that he had seen the lance-points of two mounted men just below the next rise. In a minute Oliver, Vivian, and several men were going forward almost on hands and knees; and, reaching the crest, they saw with their glasses two mounted men, clearly Uhlans. These were followed, and were seen to enter a small wood, where it was soon discovered that some two hundred men at least were off-saddled. The scouts retired, and the commander of the troop discussed the possibilities of the situation.

'Twenty-five of us to two hundred! Tough odds!' he muttered.

'Yes,' said Vivian; 'but still we ought not to let them get off scot-free.'

'I've got an idea,' said the troop commander. 'We have a Lewis gun at the main picket. A couple of troopers could gallop there and back in an hour, one with the gun and another with a dozen belts of ammunition.'

'Splendid idea!' said Vivian; and away went two men.

While they were away the whole of the dispositions were made, and a plan of Oliver's was adopted.

'Mind,' said the troop commander, 'it's a jolly dangerous device, and you do it on your own responsibility.'

'That's all right,' said Oliver.

A close watch was kept on the Uhlans, and they were still in the wood when the troopers returned with the gun. This was placed in a little grove of trees, the troop mounted and placed in position; then

Oliver, smoking a cigarette and looking as if he did not suspect there was a German within miles, rode straight off toward the wood. Vivian was very uneasy, as he knew the danger Oliver was running.

When close to the wood, Oliver drew rein as though he had suddenly seen the enemy, whom he knew would be watching him. Then, turning his horse, he ducked down and started off at a gallop, a dozen bullets flying after him. He made straight for the little grove of trees, a hundred yelling Uhlans after him. They were well abreast of the grove when, br-r-r rattled the Lewis gun, and men and horses went down. Other Uhlans were coming from the wood, and the machine-gun rattled out till all the belts were exhausted. Then, with a wild cheer, sword in hand, the British troopers, led by their officers, were amongst the Germans, and they smote until their arms ached. For two miles they pursued the terrified Uhlans, until the bugle rang out the 'retire,' and reluctantly the troopers reined in their blown horses.

Fully half the Germans were on the ground, while the British had only three casualties.

'That'll give the Boches a lesson in cavalry manœuvres,' said Oliver gaily. 'I'm afraid they've got a bit swollen-headed again lately.'

'We'd better be getting back,' said the troop commander; 'these fellows generally move in hordes, and I don't want to spoil a good morning's work by running foolish risks.'

Accordingly they returned to their post, where they off-saddled, well satisfied with their morning's work.

X

Old Rock was very wroth to think he hadn't been in the 'scrap.' 'I ain't seen a 'Un for so long I shall forget what their square 'eads look like,' he said. 'It's time we was back in France.'

The three men who had been wounded were given first aid, but their condition was such that it demanded immediate surgical assistance, and it was decided to run them down to Salonika at once in the car which had brought Oliver and Vivian out. Rock could have driven them, but it was thought better to send a corporal who had been a chauffeur before he joined, and who had the advantage of being a Red Cross man into the bargain, Rock not being exactly the sort of driver to whom to trust wounded soldiers. The corporal was to bring the car back for the officers, and Rock would drive them to head-quarters.

But long before the car got back an alarm was raised that a big body of Germans, evidently enraged at the severe lesson they had received in the morning, were advancing to attack the picket. Skirmishers went out to get in touch and hold them in check until the main picket had retired. Oliver and Vivian were accommodated with mounts, when suddenly they thought of Rock.

'What are we going to do with him?' asked Vivian. 'He'll have to ride back to Salonika.'

There was a third horse, and Rock was told he would have to ride it.

'Not if I knows it,' he said. 'Ugh! I can't bear the very smell of the beasts.'

'Don't be silly, Rock! We must be off at once; it's impossible to do the journey on foot.'

'Then I'll stop 'ere an' fight it out. Leave me a

rifle an' a 'undred rounds, an' rest assured as Dick Rock won't go out alone. A man's got to die some day, an' if my time's up I'm ready.'

'Nonsense, man! Up you get; we've no time to

waste.'

By that time the troopers were retiring, and it was clear there was not a minute to lose.

Rock, however, resolutely refused to trust his neck on a horse, and even when commanded to do so he refused.

'If you ordered me to jump into a river I'd obey you,' he said; 'but if you ordered me to jump over a tree I couldn't do it. Same as you tell me to ride; if I could I would, but I can't, an' there's an end of it. An' now, gentlemen, shake 'ands. Old Dick Rock 'as got 'is faults, but I've—I've got to like you, an', 'ang it, I ain't ashamed to own it,' and he held out a horny hand.

Both Oliver and Vivian shook the old soldier's hand warmly, and then quietly led the horses away, and returned with three rifles and some ammunition,

which they proceeded to serve out.

'What's three rifles for?' asked Rock.

'There are three of us,' said Vivian.

'But you're goin'?'

'No, we're not.'

'But you ain't goin' to chuck away your lives. I won't have that. You're young, an' you're—you're

gentlemen, an' '----

'Precisely, Rock,' said Oliver; 'we're officers and we're gentlemen, and — we're comrades. We've stood together in many a tight corner, and we're going to stand together in one more.'

'Yes,' said Vivian, 'we all escape or we all stay.'

'D'ye mean it, gentlemen?' asked Rock, his voice a little husky.

'Decidedly.'

Rock was silent a moment; then he said, 'Gawd bless you, Mr Oliver! Gawd bless you, Mr Vivian! Excuse an old soldier takin' a liberty, but you're just two boys to me. I'd a' died for either of you in a minute, for you're soldiers an' ye've treated me as such; but I'll do more than die for you, I'll get on a 'orse for you.'

'You will?'

'I will.'

'Bully for you, Rock!' said Oliver. 'It's as easy as sitting in an armchair, and we'll soon be out of

danger.'

The noise of firing was heard, and Oliver soon had the three horses ready. He chose the quietest-looking beast for Rock, and, while Vivian held his head, assisted the old soldier into the saddle. He adjusted the stirrups, and saw that Cheery sat well down.

'Now push your feet home in the stirrups,' he said, 'keep your heels down, and sit back. Just feel the horse's mouth with the reins, and you'll be all right.'

These preliminaries being settled, Oliver and Vivian mounted, and the three set off at a walk, Rock in the middle.

'Feel comfortable?' asked Vivian.

'So so,' replied Rock.

'Then I think we'd better try a trot; the Boches are getting uncomfortably near. Just give the horse a kick.'

Rock did so, and the horse, making a sudden jump forward, almost unseated him.

'Whoa back!' cried Rock, and jerked at the horse's

mouth. The animal threw up its head and stopped so suddenly that another accident almost happened. The situation was getting desperate, and Vivian took hold of Rock's right rein.

'Keep him in the saddle, Oliver,' he said; and the three in line went off at a smart trot, Oliver holding Rock's left arm.

Bump, bump; bumpetty bump!

'Oh lor',' groaned Rock, 'my blessed 'ead'll be jolted off.'

'Stick to it,' cried Vivian; 'bear on your stirrups, and rise with the action of the horse.'

'I ca—can't,' jerked Rock, and, bumpetty bump, he went until suddenly he lost his right stirrup, and lurched over against Vivian, who saved him from falling.

Bumpetty bump, bumpetty bump, they went, Rock complaining bitterly, until, raising his knees, he lost both stirrups, and, hanging on wildly by the reins, made his mount rear badly.

'Drop the reins altogether,' said Vivian. 'Shove your feet home in the stirrups, and hold on by the front of the saddle. Captain Hastings and I will guide the horse.' In this way they covered a couple of miles, until Rock declared he could go no farther.

'Leave me,' he cried; 'I'd sooner die than have my inside shaken out.'

'You'll be all right,' said Oliver; 'you're getting on fine. A mile or two more and we shall be in safety.'

A bullet hummed overhead, and several pursuing Germans were seen.

'Walk on gently, Rock,' said Oliver, and he and Vivian dismounted, took their rifles from the buckets, and, kneeling, opened fire on the pursuing Germans. They checked them; then, mounting, galloped after Rock, who was some distance ahead. Rock's horse, hearing the galloping hoof-beats, pricked up its ears and broke into a gallop also.

'Whoa!' shouted Rock, and tugged at the bridle; but the horse had got the bit between its teeth, and no amount of tugging had any effect. Oliver and Vivian dug in their heels, and tried to overtake the horse before an accident happened, for Rock was swaying and reeling about in a most alarming manner. He slipped a little sideways, righted himself, and was thrown forward right on to the horse's neck, where he clung for a moment, and then fell heavily to the ground. The horse shot away, and Oliver and Vivian just had time to pull to the right and left to escape trampling on their old comrade. They both dismounted.

Rock was unconscious and bleeding from a wound on the head. Oliver felt his heart. 'He's alive,' he said. 'At first I feared he'd broken his neck.'

'He came a fearful cropper,' muttered Vivian.
'Why on earth doesn't some knowledge of riding form part of every soldier's training?'

Bang-zipp, bang-zipp! and bullets began again to whizz round them.

'Up with Rock on the saddle,' cried Vivian; and Oliver and he, with some little difficulty, got the old man on to Oliver's horse.

'Now up and off!'

'But you?'

'I'll follow;' and, ripping the rifle again from the bucket, he emptied the magazine at the pursuing Germans. Then he galloped after Oliver, and in a mile or two overtook him. Between them they got Rock into safety, and met the car coming out from Salonika. They dismounted and got into the car, laying Rock on the seat, and telling the driver to return with all speed. They undid Cheery's tunic; and, thinking he was still unconscious, Vivian tried to pour a little brandy and water into his mouth. After the first few drops had gurgled down a hand slowly came up, took the flask, and held it to his lips until it was perfectly empty. Then a drowsy voice said, 'I'll get even with you, Beaky Lew, you blighter, if it takes me five years.'

## CHAPTER XLIV.

### BACK TO THE TRENCHES.

ROCK was more seriously hurt than was at first supposed. Besides being very badly shaken and bruised, the knock on the head gave him concussion, and for a week he was in bed. The doctor certified him as unfit for duty, and wanted to send him home; but the old man resolutely refused to go; and when, a fortnight after the skirmish, Oliver, Vivian, and Dwyer were ordered to rejoin their regiments in France, Rock accompanied them. Since his accident he had grown very taciturn, and Oliver and Vivian were somewhat concerned about him.

The world was ringing with the news of the splendid defence being put up at Verdun by the French, and Oliver and Vivian were eager to take their share in the offensive which it was thought the British contemplated.

Enthusiastic Germans were strong in their belief that a big victory for them was in sight. Hindenburg and Mackensen had marched from victory to victory in Russia; in the west Germany had stood firm against the French thrusts in Artois and Champagne; Serbia was crushed; and the Austrians held the Italians on the mountain frontier. But the rulers of Germany knew that their resources were coming to an end. The might of the Allies was growing. Britain was accumulating a vast army and a prodigious amount of munitions, grimly and

determinedly the Allies held on, German peace-talk was ignored, 'friendly' neutral interference was politely declined. Ultimate victory for Germany was not probable, her credit was declining all over the world, the grip of the British navy was strengthening. The longer the war lasted the worse terms would Germany get. She must score a crushing victory over France, and then claim generous terms; and so the mighty attack on Verdun was commenced.

In the full confidence of success, the Germans concentrated thousands of guns of every calibre on the Verdun front; then with four army corps commenced an attack unprecedented in the history of the world for its fierceness and its duration. So mighty was the blow, and carried out with such disregard of human life, that the French in the early days were hurled back, and the salient which they held was driven in. But the French army, though bruised, dazed, and bleeding, was unconquered; though forced back, it was unbroken, and determined to die to the last man before the hated German should break the line. When the second line of defence was reached it stood at bay, and a series of battles took place which for ferocity and expenditure of human life have hardly had their parallel in history.

At the time when Oliver and Vivian returned to the western front all the world knew that the fate of France trembled in the balance, that Germany was staking everything to force a decisive issue, and that a smashing French defeat might have very serious consequences for the Allies.

The Wessex Fusiliers had moved up in rear of Souchez, and Vivian and Oliver received a very warm welcome. Skinner and Harris, both looking very fit, were among the first to crowd round, and there was no mistaking the sincerity of their pleasure at the meeting.

'Glad to see you back on your feet again,' said Oliver, 'and awfully obliged to you, Skinner, for the

care you took of the pater.'

'Don't mention it, Hastings. I was almost as anxious about him as you were, and delighted when he pulled round. I saw him just before I left London, and he was looking fairly fit. By the way, have you heard he's been made a C.B.?'

'Good lord, no!'

'Fact, old man! I'll tell you all about it at dinner.'

There were those among the men, too, who were delighted to meet the young officers—Reedsdale, Lord Rossville, and many a one who had been in a tough corner with them. Rock also came in for many a handshake and slap on the back; but he was not at all himself, and took but little notice of his welcome.

The following day Colonel Lloyd informed Oliver and Vivian that Sir Douglas Haig, then commander-in-chief in place of Viscount French, had sent word that he wanted to see them at headquarters. He welcomed them warmly when they arrived, and asked them a great many questions about Serbia and the Dardanelles, making them recount all their adventures. He was particularly anxious to hear all about the Zeppelin raid at Salonika and the meeting with Lord Kitchener.

After the tale had been told he said, 'Well, gentlemen, Lord Kitchener is a man who never forgets; he has been informed by General Birdwood of the share you took in the Gallipoli evacuation, and of your work at Salonika. He himself considers he is indebted to you, and has written me on the subject. Of course, for the work you did in Serbia and Gallipoli no public recognition can be made; but Viscount French wrote to me on the subject, and he has made certain representations to his Majesty, which I am told have been graciously agreed to.'

Both officers looked astonished.

'I am sure, Sir Douglas, I have done nothing to warrant any special reward,' said Oliver.

'Neither have I,' echoed Vivian.

'I did not make the recommendations,' said Sir Douglas, 'so don't blame me. All I know is that Viscount French recommended Captain Hastings for the Victoria Cross, Captain Drummond for the D.S.O., and Private Richard Rock for the D.C.M.'

The young officers were hardly able to speak, so astonished were they.

'But for what?' they exclaimed. 'We have done no more than any other officer.'

'Probably not,' smiled Sir Douglas; 'but you've happened to come under notice.—Here, Armitage, bring me the list of official recommendations, will you?'

A staff officer presently came in with a bulky file, which Sir Douglas turned over until he found an entry. 'Here you are,' he said, and read out:

'ROYAL WESSEX FUSILIERS.—Captain Oliver Hastings and Private Richard Rock, near Loos, on 14th October, for their gallantry in rescuing under a heavy fire Colonel Hastings, who had been dangerously wounded, and for removing him to a place of safety. On the next day, for defending a saphead with seven men until only Lieutenant (now Captain) Hastings

and Private Rock remained, after which the two kept the foe at bay for four hours, thus rendering material assistance to their comrades; and, later in the day, for bringing up a fresh supply of bombs, and for digging out Captain Drummond and seven men who had been buried by a shell explosion, all the while under heavy fire. Captain O. Hastings recommended for the Victoria Cross, and Private Rock for the Distinguished Conduct Medal.—Captain Vivian Drummond for gallantry and great resource shown on many occasions, and especially in leading a party of his own regiment in a counter-attack on a trench which had been captured by the Germans, and which, largely owing to Captain Drummond's skilful handling of his men, was won back. Recommended for the Distinguished Service Order.'

'It all reads very well, but so would the doings of a thousand other officers whose deeds the world will never know.'

'Make the most of your good fortune while it lasts,' said Sir Douglas Haig. 'Lord Kitchener thinks he sees in you the makings of good officers. Captain Drummond is to go back to the Secret Service, and will in a few days return to England; Captain Hastings is to be retained on the staff, but to be employed regimentally until the appointment is published. You are both young men, and there is no reason why with luck you may not both wear the crossed batons on your shoulders before you die.'

He then shook hands with them very heartily, and Oliver and Vivian returned to their regiment. On their way they decided not to say anything of what they had heard until the news became public.

A day or two later the Wessex Fusiliers moved up

to Neuville St Vaast, where they once more went into the trenches. It was a particularly 'unhealthy' spot, mines being exploded by one side or the other every

day.

Meanwhile the titanic struggle at Verdun was waxing fiercer and fiercer. The Germans had suffered huge losses, but ever fresh divisions were hurled forward, and the guns ground everything to powder. Blood and steel were to crush France; the whole of the first French line and a large stretch of country, together with thousands of prisoners and scores of

guns, had been captured; but France held on doggedly; the line bent, but did not break.

The Wessex had six days in the trenches, and then retired for rest. During this time Oliver and Vivian got an opportunity of going to Verdun to see what was happening there. They made the long journey by night, and reached Haudromont Farm soon after dawn. Long before they arrived the thunder of the guns grew almost unbearable. Without ceasing, shells of every calibre were bursting all around. Thousands of projectiles were whistling, howling, or moaning in every direction, the sounds combining into an absolutely infernal roar. Smoke and dust obscured the vision, making a kind of fog; shell fragments flew continually. Every house for miles round had been battered down; giant trees were uprooted; but out there in front, in the shattered woods and on the blood-drenched slopes of hills, French and German were facing one another, and the fate of France was being decided. The very air trembled with the noise of the assault that was just developing, and, although two miles away, the roar of the artillery was deafening. The French and

German guns made an absolutely continuous crash, and the bang, bang, bang of the huge shells bursting sounded like constant blows on a giant anvil.

The tide was on the turn. The futility of the hideous expenditure of human life was beginning to dawn even upon German intellects; the heroism of France was day by day more apparent. General Petain had taken over the command, and the German advance was checked; in some instances the enemy had even been pushed back.

Oliver and Vivian, old campaigners though they were, were awestruck.

'I should never have thought such a scene was possible,' said Vivian; 'this beats all we've seen yet, Noll.'

'And I should think, when the world at large realises what modern warfare can develop into, war will be unthinkable in the future.'

Verdun itself was like a city of the dead. It was slowly and systematically being battered to bits. Here and there were quarters which had escaped the pitiless rain of shells, but not a single civilian remained in the town, and the military were out of sight under ground.

On the roads behind Verdun thousands of motor lorries, all marshalled into transport battalions, hummed and buzzed by in a never-ending line at a regulation fifteen miles an hour. Thousands of tons of material, tens of thousands of men, were moving up to the all-devouring maw of Verdun. Going the other way were others, thousands of maimed and wounded Frenchmen, who had done their best for their beloved country, and here and there batches of ill-clad, half-crazy-looking, scowling German prisoners.

The French were cheerful, calmly confident, and fully determined.

'Germany must score a success soon,' said a young French lieutenant to Oliver and Vivian, 'or'—— and he shrugged his shoulders.

'Or what?' asked Vivian.

'It will be our turn. France, Britain, and Russia will strike; we shall strike hard, and all at once, and then—ah, then—you will see. The crowds who bawled for war in the Unter den Linden in Berlin will be howling again; only they will be howling another tune;' and the young Frenchman laughed gaily.

'I hope they will, and I hope I shall be there to

hear it,' said Vivian.

'To be sure, monsieur, we shall all be there; and then, when it is over, Paris will be herself once more.'

## CHAPTER XLV.

## 'THE ENEMY SPRANG A MINE.'

IT was the last night of the Wessex in the trenches, and the men were thinking about their relief. It had been a very trying time—heavy bombardments on both sides, small cutting-out expeditions, and, worst of all, frequent mine explosions.

Vivian had received orders to proceed to London to take up an appointment, and the idea of being separated had much affected both him and Oliver, for they had not been parted since the war began.

Oliver, alone in his dugout, missed the society of Cheery Dick, whom he had positively forbidden to come into the trenches. The old man, although he would not admit it, was very unwell, and both Oliver and Vivian had determined to get him to England. Till they went into the trenches without him, they never realised how really helpful the old soldier was, nor how many a weary hour he beguiled with his yarns.

Oliver was feeling very 'down,' when Skinner came up to his dugout. 'Hastings,' he said, 'the Boche has been very troublesome lately. I'm thinking of organising a little "stunt" on my own. Will you stand in?'

'With pleasure; anything for a change.'

'Well, it's a small cutting-out expedition. There's a sniper opposite us who has been perfectly objectionable lately, and I'm going out to smash up his lair.'

'Very well; make your arrangements, and I'll fall in with them.'

'I only want you to stand to when I give you the tip that we're off; and, in case the Boche gets rusty, and chivvies us back to our trenches, to send in a few rounds to draw off his attention.'

'Very well.'

A little later, while Oliver was making a round of his men, he heard a cough behind him, and, turning, saw Cheery Dick. 'Hallo, Rock! what are you doing here?' he said. 'I thought I'd forbidden you to come into the trenches.'

'I'm sent,' said Rock doggedly. 'I suppose you ain't goin' to "strafe" me for obeyin' orders.'

'Who sent you?'

'Captain Drummond.'

'What for?'

"E sent me with a message."

'Well, let me have it, and be off again.'

'All right, sir; all right. I ain't goin' to do anything desperate. Captain Drummond says 'e's got orders to start for England in the mornin', an' 'e's coming out to say good-bye to you to-night.'

'At A.M. or P.M., Rock?'

'At A.M.,' replied Rock with a grin at the latest joke; A.M. meaning before the mine went up, P.M. after.

'Very well, Rock; tell him I'll be in the dugout.'

'Oh, an' there's another thing, sir. 'E says 'e will take me with him, sir; an' what do you say to it?'

'I say, "By all means."'

'An' I always said as I wouldn't go. I meant to see this war out with the two of you. An' now 'e's goin' an' you're stoppin', an' I can't be in two places.

So I've decided to stop with you, an' I want you to back me up.'

'You'd be much better at home, Rock; a month or two will put you all right; then you can come back.'

'No, sir, I won't go; an' please tell Captain Drummond so.'

'Very well; I'll talk to him. Now you toddle off back,' and Oliver saw the old man into the communication trench, determined to tell Vivian to take him.

The Germans became quiet as it grew dark, and Skinner came along to say that at eleven o'clock he and a small party were going to raid the trenches in front of them.

Punctually at eleven, Oliver had his men all on the alert, waiting for the slightest sound to tell them that Skinner was busy with the enemy. It was a dark night, and all was particularly silent on their front, the listening men hearing nothing but an occasional distant shot.

Half-an-hour passed, when a number of loud reports, which Oliver knew were made by bombs, rang out; then yells and shouts and the occasional bang, bang of rifles were heard, and by the sounds it was clear that the British had penetrated the German trench. The noise lasted some time; and, as the essence of all such raids is the speed with which they are carried out, Oliver began to get nervous.

Presently the rattle of a machine-gun was heard, and Oliver grew more anxious still. Suddenly the noise of the gun ceased, and the sounds of fighting got nearer. A couple of Verrey lights went up, and in the no man's land a mass of men fighting fiercely

was seen. The few British seemed almost surrounded by Germans, and Oliver saw they were in difficulties.

'Come on, men!' he cried; 'we must go to their assistance.'

In a trice he was over the parapet with a score of men at his heels. Pushing under their own barbed wire, with bayonets at the charge they dashed to the rescue. The Verrey lights made all as bright as day. Skinner was seen fighting like a Trojan, and with him were half-a-dozen men, while the others were carrying a machine-gun, and forcing along eight or nine prisoners. It was to prevent the men and gun falling into British hands that the Germans had left their trench.

Before Oliver could reach Skinner, a ragged, wild-looking figure sprang from somewhere, apparently a hole near the German trenches, and with a ferocity indescribable fell upon the Germans in rear, and in half-a-dozen seconds had bayoneted as many of the enemy. Then a German shot him through the head just as Oliver got up.

His men got to work with the bayonet, and sharp work it was. Oliver received a gash on the left arm almost at the beginning, but with his revolver he shot the man who had wounded him. Two more shared the same fate, and then the Germans broke and ran.

'Back to your trench, boys,' cried Oliver, for he was anxious not to lose men, as if such encounters cost the British more than they did the enemy the officers in charge were likely to get a severe rap over the knuckles. 'Bring every man of ours in, wounded or dead.'

He himself was assisting when a man cried out, 'What is this chap, sir—a German or an Englishman?'

Oliver saw the soldier was stooping over the body of the fantastic figure who had done such execution on the Huns.

'He fought well for us,' said Oliver; 'bring him in,' and Lord Rossville and another man lifted him up.

The party got back to their own trench with little more loss, and then Skinner came up to Oliver. 'Thanks for your timely help, old man,' he said; 'we shouldn't have got back otherwise. We dropped into their trenches, and took them quite by surprise. We "strafed" 'em right and left; but some great brute hopped out of a dugout and caught me in his arms. His hug was like a bear's, and I couldn't get away from him, and all the while he was yelling like blue murder. My sergeant providentially came up and bayoneted the beast. Ugh! his blood is all over me. We then bombed the dugouts, and had collared several men, three of them officers, when they whipped round a machine-gun and let rip at us. But our blood was up, and we took the gun and got off with our prisoners and the gun. The noise, though, had brought out fellows from the support trench, and they came after us. You arrived just in time.'

'Glad to have been of service, Skinner; and now let us have a look at the prisoners.'

These were found to be a major and two lieutenants, with five men, and they were promptly sent off to the rear with the captured gun.

Then the British wounded were seen to, amongst them the curious figure who had come to their assistance. Oliver found Lord Rossville bending over him, holding a flask to his lips. The officers saw that the man was wearing rags that had once been khaki, but he had long hair and a beard.

'Rum-looking fellow,' said Skinner.

'Yes, and the funny thing is, sir,' said Lord

Rossville, 'he has our badge on his collar.'

The three bent over him just as he opened his eyes. His face was almost like that of a skeleton, and was ghastly pale. It was clear he was dying, but he looked at the officers, and the faintest suspicion of a smile flickered for a moment on his lips. 'My regiment!' he muttered.

'Good God, what can he mean?' cried Oliver.
'Give him a drop more brandy, Bulmer'—Lord

Rossville insisted on serving as Bulmer.

Bulmer did so, when the man struggled up on one elbow. 'I'm Wilson,' he gasped. 'Tommy Wilson. The Huns—murdered my wife—and my baby—Zeppelins,' and he paused. Then he seemed to revive. 'I've dogged 'em though,' he cried in fierce, strong tones. 'For months I've hid and sniped 'em. Hid all day. I've killed at least fifty. I've avenged—Oh God, I'm going. Good-bye; good'— His head fell back, and he was gone; and with him the terrible history of those months that no man on earth would ever hear.

Another light was procured, and then it was seen that the poor fellow was indeed the Wilson who had disappeared after his wife and child had been murdered at home by Zeppelin bombs.

'Good heavens! what a tale he could have unfolded if he had lived! But, poor fellow, he's better dead.

I believe his mind was unhinged,' said Oliver.

They wrapped him reverently in a blanket, determined to give him a military funeral next day.

It rather puzzled Oliver, when he was back again in his dugout, that the Germans had not treated them to a deluge of shells; for, as a rule, when they were worsted in such encounters they revenged themselves by sending over a few hundred high-explosives. He was wondering why they were so quiet, and then fell to thinking of Vivian and their impending separation, when—bang—flash—gr-r-r—the ground rocked, rose, a fiery breath of hell seized him, and hurled him aloft, then—chaos and utter darkness.

Private Rock had finished sorting out Vivian's kit and getting it ready for him on the morrow. Not that it took him long; a valise and a small bag held the lot. Supper was disposed of, and Cheery cleared away. 'No good'll come of this 'ere breakin' up of old associations like,' he said. 'We came out 'ere together, an' we oughter all stay or all go.'

'Just what I think, Rock.'

'You ain't obliged to go, are you, Mr Vivian?' He had got latterly into the habit of calling his masters Mr Oliver and Mr Vivian.

'Absolute orders.'

'Well, you're a-goin' to say good-bye to Mr Oliver afore you goes, you said.'

'Yes, and it's a hard thing to do. I shall be gone before he gets back to-morrow.'

'We'd better be goin'.'

'There's no need for you to come.'

'Ain't there? Mr Oliver said he pertikler wanted to see me again.'

'What on earth for?'

'I think he's got a little gift for me,' said the old man unblushingly.

Vivian looked keenly at Cheery, but he returned

his officer's gaze unflinchingly.

Presently they started, and a long march it was. As they got near the front-line trenches they heard the sound of firing.

'Things are lively,' said Vivian.

There was some delay in getting forward, and presently a few German prisoners were seen being conducted to the rear, when they learned that the Wessex had made a 'stunt,' and had 'strafed' the Boches.

'Some casualties, I think,' said a young artillery officer carelessly; 'but I've heard no particulars.'

'Hurry up, Rock,' said Vivian, 'I feel strangely uneasy to-night.'

'So do I, some'ow.'

They were passing on in the darkness when suddenly there was a blinding flash. The very earth shook; there was a sullen booming roar; then all was dark again.

'A mine!' cried Vivian; 'and near our front! Was it on the German lines or ours?'

They hurried forward, and soon discovered that a very inferno of artillery fire had suddenly burst out. 'The Boches have blown in a portion of our front-line trenches, and are attacking to occupy the crater,' was the cry.

Men were running forward to repel the attack, and with them Vivian and Rock. Verrey lights made everything clearly visible, and soon a great gaping hole, bordered by heaps of earth, as though thrown

up by an earthquake, was reached. Swarms of Germans had rushed up to occupy the crater; but the British were disputing every foot, and a furious fight was being waged. Vivian and Rock were soon in the thick of it. Bayonets, rifle butts, revolvers, picks, spades, and fists were being used, and it was an absolute riot of slaughter. The British, however, hating mine warfare with a deadly hatred, fought like furies; and reinforcements coming up, the Boche, badly beaten, was hurled back. Then the machineguns and artillery caught him; and, battered and smashed, he cowered in his trenches, where he was pinned by the artillery fire, having paid dearly for his venture.

The work of rescue commenced. Willing hands dug and scratched and toiled, and several men were extricated from the débris, including Skinner, sensible but badly hurt; Lord Rossville, regimentally known as Private Bulmer, crushed to death; and beside him a poor nondescript figure whom none recognised at the time, but who was afterwards known to be the unfortunate Wilson. Later on the two were laid side by side in a common grave.

'Poor Bulmer! I expect he's the first of his line to die as a private soldier,' said Vivian, 'but he's done his duty nobly.'

In an agony of apprehension they searched on and on for Oliver, and presently it was Rock who found him, lying horribly crumpled up, but uncovered with earth. The spot where he had been had caught the fag-end of the explosion, and he had been hurled into the air and had fallen behind the trench.

Tenderly Vivian and Rock lifted Oliver, and never left him till he was in the doctor's hands. He was alive, but unconscious, and the doctor spent some time over him.

'Is it a case?' asked Vivian, setting his jaws hard to conquer his emotion.

'Shock and concussion,' replied the doctor curtly.

'Any chance for him?'

'God knows. Sometimes death is a mercy to such;' and Vivian, knowing how often total deafness and dumbness, paralysis, or loss of reason was the result of such cases, turned away his head to hide his emotion, while two glistening tears stole down Rock's leathern cheeks. From Skinner, who had had his left hand blown off, and was in agonies of pain, though he bit his lips till they bled rather than make a moan, they learnt something of what had happened.

At midday Vivian had to go.

'Dick,' he said pressing the old man's hand, 'you'll

stay by our friend.'

'Till—till the end,' muttered the old soldier. For several minutes Vivian stood looking at the pale, deathlike figure of his bosom friend, who had never moved or made a sound since he had been picked up. Then he grasped Rock's horny hand. 'Wire me the instant there is—any news,' he said; then, with a sob he did his best to suppress, at the call of duty he walked slowly away.

'The enemy sprang a mine, but failed to hold the crater,' was the laconic official summary of that

night's work.

## CHAPTER XLVI.

### A BREAK IN THE CLOUDS.

FROM the grim desolation of the battlefield, from the agony of crushed and maimed humanity, from the horror of the Valley of Death, pass we to more pleasant scenes.

Six weeks have elapsed, and it is a glorious summer day. Down the Mall roll many carriages between rows of enthusiastic people, the better-born raising their hats and smiling a welcome, the heartier lower class cheering lustily. The King is holding an investiture, and servants-civil, naval, and military, who have served him faithfully in all parts of the world—have been summoned to receive at the hands of the King the reward of their services. Statesmen, Generals, Admirals, subalterns, and privates, from all parts are arriving. But we are concerned only with two carriages which contain five soldiers. They include Colonel Hastings, now quite recovered, but looking pale and thin, and his son Oliver, hobbling on crutches, one leg supported in a sling. He had lain very close to death's-door, but splendid medical treatment and a good constitution had saved him. Though sustaining a fractured leg and numberless contusions and bruises, and having been for three days speechless and senseless, he was now slowly pulling round, and hoping to be in at the finish of the war. Vivian, looking well and fit, and very smart in his scarletbanded staff cap; Captain Skinner, his artificial left hand concealed in a glove; and Private Rock, in a brand new uniform for the occasion, completed the

party.

They alight from the carriages, and find themselves in the great reception-room with a crowd of officers. The King seems to know every one and everything, and makes pleasant remarks as he hands the decorations to the recipients.

'I am delighted to see you well again, Colonel,' he says to Colonel Hastings as he hangs the gold Maltese Cross of the Order of the Bath round his neck; 'and I hope you will live long to wear this decoration. And this is your gallant son;' and he shook hands with Oliver. 'I have heard from Viscount French about him, and I have never conferred the Victoria Cross on a more worthy officer. It gives me the greatest satisfaction to decorate both father and son on the same day.

'Captain Drummond, it gives me great pleasure to bestow the D.S.O. upon you for your many services; and the Military Cross upon you, Captain Skinner, for your very plucky leading of an attack upon the enemy trenches, and the capture of officers and a machine-gun. I commiserate with you on the loss of your hand.'

He shook hands with each one, and presently he

came to Rock, who stood rigidly at attention.

The King looked at the double row of medalribbons. 'A fine old soldier, I see,' he said, 'and I am delighted to hand you one more decoration. But you look a little pale. Have you been ill?'

'Yes, your Majesty.'

'I am glad to see you better.'

'An' I'm glad to see you better, sir.'

'I've not been ill,' said the King with a smile.

'Last time I saw you, you looked bad enough, your Majesty; time you was thrown an' kicked by a 'orse.'

'Oh, you saw my unfortunate accident in France,' laughed the King. 'I am ashamed of my bad horse-manship.'

'It wasn't you, it was the 'orse, sir. 'Orrible things! My illness was caused the same way. Never 'ave nothin' to do with 'orses, sir.'

The King laughed heartily as he pinned the medal on Rock's tunic. 'You'll have to move your ribbons along,' he said.

'Yes, sir; more expense! No matter what 'appens to Tommy, 'e's always got to dip 'is 'and in 'is pocket for it.'

The King looked at the old soldier quizzically, and was clearly much amused, for he smiled again; and the Queen, who was present, came up to find out what amused the King so much.

'This gallant soldier has been telling me to have nothing to do with horses,' said the King to her.

'Indeed! And don't you like them?' asked the Queen.

'Ate 'em, your Majesty. 'Ere 'ave I been through four campaigns, not counting the last one, which ain't a campaign at all, only murder. Never had a scratch, your Majesty, till I was—er—silly enough to get on a 'orse, an' that was the beginnin' of my trouble.'

'Indeed! how was that?'

Oliver, Vivian, and the rest were on tenterhooks as to what Rock, who seemed perfectly at home, would say, and gave him ominous nods and winks. But he took no notice, and began to talk to the Queen, who now and then laughed heartily. The officers caught a word here and there, as, 'We was never intended to ride,' 'Vicious brutes, artful as monkeys,' and so on, and were intensely relieved when her Majesty, with a friendly nod, left Private Rock.

The whole party were in the vestibule waiting for their carriages when a gentleman of the household came up and handed Rock an envelope. 'His Majesty sent you this to defray the expense of altering the position of your medal-ribbons.'

In an instant the envelope was opened, and Rock held a ten-pound note in his hand. 'My best thanks to 'is Majesty,' he said; 'an' tell 'im not to forget what I told 'im about 'orses.'

The gentleman gravely said he would do so, and in another moment they were in the carriages.

'Rock, I trust you were not over-familiar with their Majesties,' said Vivian. 'What on earth did you revert to the King's accident for?'

'To warn 'im,' said Rock solemnly; 'an' (as to being familiar, my old captain in the Fightin' Fifth says, "Rock, if you ever 'ave the honour of addressin' the Queen "—that was the old Queen Victoria then—"speak to 'er without any fuss; they like it." An' what 'eld good for 'er 'olds good for the present one, I take it.'

Mr James Skinner, Captain Skinner's father, had begged the whole party to honour him with their presence at lunch when the investiture was over; and Oliver, anxious to please Skinner, had persuaded the others to accept.

They drove to the 'Berkeley,' where lunch fit for an emperor had been prepared.

Mr Skinner, a short, stout man in a white waist-

coat, was there to receive them, assisted by Mrs Skinner in black satin. Mrs Hastings and Marjorie were also guests, and the lunch was a huge success.

A pleasant little surprise for Rock was Oliver's handing to him a cheque for two hundred and fifty pounds, subscribed by himself, Vivian, and Major Dwyer, for the service he had rendered them in saving them from the poisoned coffee in Paris.

Then Mr Skinner rose to make a speech. 'Colonel 'Astings, ladies, and gentlemen,' he said, 'this is the proudest moment of my life. I am a plain, common man. I've made my money out of sausages; but every penny I've made is at the service of dear Old England if she wants it. And I've tried to make my boy a gentleman. I didn't want 'im to go in the army, but 'e went and 'as distinguished 'imself, and you've honoured me with your presence. It's an honour, and I feel it, and I drink to your 'ealth, one and all.'

"Ear! 'ear!' cried Rock, banging on the table.

Poor Skinner looked uneasy, and he whispered to Oliver, 'The dear old dad means well; and I never disguised the fact that he was a sausage merchant.'

'My dear chap, when a man has got a heart of gold

nothing else matters.'

And presently, while Vivian and Marjorie seemed to have a lot to say to one another in a window recess, Colonel Hastings said to Mr Skinner, 'At any time that you can spare a week-end I shall be happy to welcome you and Mrs Skinner to The Hollies.'

Mr Skinner regularly beamed. 'Do you mean it, Colonel?' he asked.

<sup>&#</sup>x27;Assuredly.'

'Thanks a 'undred times! You've offered me what I value more than anything else, and what all my money could never buy. I shall be proud to accept your invitation.'

'And you will be of the party, of course, Skinner,' said the Colonel to the son. 'I am afraid your soldiering days, like mine, are over, so we must

fight our old battles over again.'

'I shall be honoured, Colonel. I'm glad I've had the opportunity of doing a bit for my country; but I sha'n't be sorry to doff khaki and go into the sausage business, if the dad will have me, with one hand.'

'And, my boy? You don't want to work with your ands. You can get a undred pairs of ands at thirty bob a week. What's wanted is brains, and thank goodness the Germans left you those.'

Captain Skinner laughed.

Oliver, as he shook hands with him, added his invitation to his father's. 'We're a poor lot of cripples,' he said, 'and must console one another. Of the five of us who joined up a year ago, Harris is the

only one now left serving at the front.'

'Don't you get croaking, Oliver,' said Vivian, turning round. 'Only poor Crawford is really gone, and the rest of us will be with the boys when they march into Berlin. Skinner will never be able to keep away for long, and I'll whisper to some bigwig to get him a nice job where only one hand is required.'

'And, Rock, when you get your discharge I've got a comfortable little job for you at The Hollies,' said

the Colonel.

'Thanks, Colonel; but do you keep 'orses?'

'Of course I do. Why, do you want a job as coachman?'

Rock shivered. 'Lord forbid, Colonel! I was goin' to say, give me a little shanty out of sight and 'earin' of the beasts.'

'Certainly,' laughed the Colonel; 'the job I've got in view for you is my private factorum.'

'Fac who, Colonel?' asked Rock suspiciously.

'My orderly, I mean.'

The word brought Rock up to attention in the old

style.

'Parade—shun!' he cried. 'I'll tell off the servants, Colonel; an' if any one of 'em gets chewin' the rag or visitin' the canteen out of hours I'll 'ave 'em in the clink an' march 'em up to the orderly-room in the mornin'. An' if we don't put a stop to any monkey tricks, then I ain't learnt nothin' in the service.'

## NOTE A-'IN KHAKI FOR THE KING.'

THE earlier adventures of Oliver Hastings and Vivian Drummond are related in the above-named story.

At the outbreak of the war, Oliver Hastings, a subaltern of Yeomanry, is spending a holiday in Frankfort. He has a dispute with a Prussian officer; a brawl ensues; he is denounced as a spy, and narrowly escapes capture. He meets an old school-fellow, Vivian Drummond, a lieutenant in the Guards, in Germany on secret service. Together, after many adventures, they manage to escape down the Rhine, cross the frontier, and reach Liége. They take part in Belgium's gallant attempt to hold up the Germanic hordes, and when the army retreats to Antwerp, with some other British officers they set off to meet the British Expeditionary Force.

They join up in time to take part in the battle of Mons and the gallant retreat therefrom. They share in the victory of the Marne, in trench work on the Aisne, and in the glorious fight of Neuve Chapelle. There, however, misfortune meets them, and both are wounded. Their services are rewarded with the Military Cross, and we leave them convalescent, and eager to begin those further adventures related in this volume.

## NOTE B-PRIVATE LYNN'S EXPLOIT.

The deeds of Private John Lynn, 2nd battalion Lancashire Fusiliers, deserve to be known to every Briton. He was one of the very few awarded both the Distinguished Conduct Medal and the Victoria Cross. The latter decoration, notwithstanding the many gallant deeds performed alike by officers and men in the present war, has been very sparingly awarded, and to earn it courage of a very high order has to be displayed.

Private Lynn won his D.C.M. on the Aisne. While in action his machine-gun jammed at a most critical moment. Without

a second's hesitation, under a positively appalling fire, he dismantled his gun, carried it to the rear, calmly repaired it, and then carried it back in time practically to annihilate the German column attacking.

At the second battle of Ypres, when the Germans were advancing behind dense clouds of asphyxiating gas, Lynn, although almost overcome by the deadly fumes, stuck to his machine-gun. His comrades, to whom gas was a new terror, were dying on all sides. The respirators which had been served out were quite inadequate, and the men, choked and blinded, fell writhing to the bottom of the trench. An order was given to retire to the reserve trenches, but Lynn was not one of those who retire in the face of danger. He realised that behind the gas were hordes of Germans, and he calmly determined that the trench should not be lost. Though his eyes and lungs were full of the poisonous fumes, and blood was streaming from his mouth, he mounted his gun on the parapet and waited, alone in his grandeur. The Germans advanced, expecting to find a trench full of corpses; they found the might and majesty of Britain awaiting them in the shape of one private soldier. He turned his gun on them, and the Germans fell in heaps before him until, demoralised, they retired. Not one German set foot in the trench, and reinforcements of the Lancashire Fusiliers, coming up to recapture the trench they thought was lost, found Lynn, then in the last stage of exhaustion, still working his gun. Tenderly they carried the hero away to a dugout, and there he lay until a second attack was made upon the trench. Then Lynn, dying though he was, made an effort to stagger back to his gun; but the deadly gas had done its work, and he fell senseless, to die an agonising death some hours later.

John Lynn's body lies in France, but his memory will live for ever in the memorials of the British army!

## NOTE C-THE HEROINE OF LOOS.

The young girl, then only seventeen, mentioned in the story is Mademoiselle Emilienne Moreau, who had remained in Loos during the whole German occupation. While the British were completing the capture of the town she tended wounded Highlanders and Territorials. The Germans having basely attacked her patients while they lay helpless, Mademoiselle

Moreau, with a heroism worthy of a veteran soldier, killed three of them with hand grenades, and shot two more with a British officer's revolver.

For her intrepid behaviour she was decorated at Versailles with the Croix de Guerre on 28th November 1915.

On 28th July 1916, at the British Embassy in Paris, Lord Bertie conferred the British Military Medal and the Order of St John of Jerusalem on this young French girl.

Mademoiselle Moreau is as modest as she is courageous; and when the medals were pinned on her breast she said, 'I am so touched that I cannot find words to express my gratitude.'

To praise this young heroine would be impertinence; she stands on a pinnacle of her own. One can only quote the words of General de Sailly, when he presented the Cross: 'I congratulate and admire you, young lady. You do honour to the women of France. You are a fine and inspiring example.'

### NOTE D-OPERATIONS ROUND LOOS.

The battle of Loos has been described both as a success and as a splendid failure. The whole operations lasted from 25th September till 15th October, and the British casualties were about fifty thousand men. The troops engaged were largely of the so-called 'New Army' and Territorials, and they displayed a splendid courage worthy of the heroes of Mons, Le Cateau, the Marne, and Ypres. Wherever they met the enemy in the open they signally defeated him, and the battle showed most conclusively that the short service British soldier, enlisted for the war, was fully the equal of the harder-trained German conscript. As a result of the battle proper, which lasted three days, the Double Crassier slag-heaps, the town of Loos, the western slopes of Hill 70, the chalk-pit, part of the Hohenzollern Redoubt, and the Hulluch quarries were captured.

Insomuch as it roughly dispelled the German idea that their position was impregnable, the battle may be looked upon as a victory. So far as smashing through the German lines is concerned it was not a success. But it is very doubtful whether the high British command ever thought of doing so. The crushing victory, the swallowing of the enemy in one big fight, as was done in old-time fighting, is, under existing conditions—with the enormous numbers of men and guns engaged, the

terrific frontage, and the marvellous efficiency of the present-day rifle—quite impossible. The enemy must be worn down; he must be reduced in numbers until he is too weak to hold his line, and has to fall back. The war will be won by killing Germans; and as a killing undertaking Loos was successful, for the German losses were much heavier than ours.

The French offensive, coincident with the British, gave them Souchez and the lower slopes of the Vimy heights.

THE END.





